GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS



9X1

BY B. H. BUXTON

TWO SHILLING BOOKS, *continued.*

Miss WETHERELL.

The Old Helmet.
Ellen Montgomery's Bookshelf.
Melbourne House.
The Two School Girls.
Wide, Wide World.
Queechy.

By the Author of "Whitefriars."

Whitefriars.
Whitehall.
Cæsar Borgia.
Owen Tudor.
Maid of Orleans.
Westminster Abbey.
Madeleine Graham.
Gold Worshippers.
Armourer's Daughter.

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GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS

A Novel

By B. H. BUXTON

AUTHOR OF "JENNIE OF THE PRINCE'S," "WON," "FETTERLESS," ETC.

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JENNIE OF "THE PRINCE'S."

WON.

FETTERLESS.

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GREAT GRENFELL GARDENS.

CHAPTER I.

THE DWELLERS IN GRENFELLIA.

A YOUNG and enterprising firm of "Builders, decorators, and surveyors," inaugurated their new venture by the erection of "Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W."

These were, to quote the advertisement, "a number of most desirable family residences, all detached, possessing every modern convenience," and, as a "distinguishing attraction," a "spacious social recreation-ground."

Those builders were certainly brave men and bold, when they started an enterprise so diametrically opposed to all the exclusive traditions of the genuine Briton, who loses no opportunity of asserting that "an Englishman's house is his castle," and declines the apostolic injunction to entertain strangers, save such as can produce good introductions or personal recommendations.

Nevertheless the speculation, or faith, of the builders was rewarded, for the houses one and all were found "desirable," and were speedily let to people who thought themselves entitled to distinction, and others again who courted it.

The recreation-ground, or "Gardens," consisted in a long oval, surrounded by forty houses, all bearing a strong likeness to one another. They were fine examples of fraternity to their inmates.

All were endowed with four bow-windows that looked like two pairs of bulging eyes. A dark door in the centre of each, the upper part of which was relieved by panels of stained glass, had the appearance of gaping mouths, which stood ready and waiting to swallow up all who gained admittance within.

There was no bulging at the back of the houses, only a smooth brick surface, indented at intervals by small-paned windows, which appeared sightless except at the hour of sunset, when they shone with a luridly-reflected light.

These were the windows which looked out upon the Gardens in which the Grenfellians were wont to disport themselves during the pleasant hours of the long summer evenings.

It is on such an evening that I purpose introducing my readers into the sacred enclosure, within the gates of which such persons only as are eligible candidates for a key of their own can hope to be admitted.

Mr. Norman, a retired merchant and a widower, has lately taken possession of No. 40 in the Gardens, and there established himself with his three daughters, Mary, Estella, and Nettie.

The girls are in the Garden on this pleasant summer evening.

Mary, the eldest, sedate and prim, if extreme neatness in style and dress deserve that uncomplimentary adjective, is seated on one of the garden-benches, busily occupied with some elaborate crewel work, and chatting to a lady by her side.

Estella, who has brought out a camp-stool, has perched herself at some little distance from her elder sister.

She is bright and piquant in look, dress, manner, and speech. Her ambition is to differ from girls in general, whom as a race she somewhat despises.

Her hair is thick and curly, and a full fringe, which Nettie describes as "a lovely touzle," falls over the forehead, which has an almost unfeminine power and breadth.

Nettie, the youngest of the sisters, is avowedly her father's pet. She is usually called "the baby," and treated as such.

Mrs. Norman died when her youngest child was born, and to the widowed father, and to thoughtful Mary, blue-eyed Nettie appears to have inherited the most charming qualities of mind and person which distinguished her fair young mother.

Nettie is nearly seventeen years old now, and boasts of this mature age with conscious pride.

She certainly belongs to the butterfly order of humanity, and is ready and eager to fly from flower to flower with a keen appreciation to sip whatever honeyed delights may be obtained from each and all.

Estella, seated apart on her camp-stool, is "taking notes." She has lately resolved to concentrate her energies, and to devote all her leisure moments to the writing of a novel, which shall embody all her pet theories, and convince the reader how fine a world this might be, if humanity in general shared Estella's views.

To make her writing realistic, Estella always carries a note-book about with her, and when opportunity offers, scratches down "descriptive bits" of the scenes and persons before her. She also likes to transcribe literally, such conversations as she considers "telling."

Nettie is moving about from one group to another, ready with a saucy word or smile of greeting for such of the Grenfellians as have come forth into the Gardens after dinner. Nettie's fair waving hair falls loosely on her shoulders, and the hat, intended to cover her head, is as usual, resting upon her hair, held in its shifting position by pale blue ribbons, which are tied in a loose bow under her round dimpled chin.

"Good-evening, Miss Braun," says Nettie, approaching a tall slim woman, who by the ornamental style of her costume, and the elaborate croquet shoes and stockings she wears, seeks to supply the attractions with which nature has failed to endow her person; now, cruel Time with relentless fingers has already commenced to draw lines and wrinkles on a once fair skin.

Theodosia Braun is painfully conscious of the injury each passing day inflicts upon her, but she refuses to cry "surrender."

By subtle arts and machinations she keeps the enemy at bay, and continues to present a seemingly youthful front to the world. The hair on Theodosia's head is very thin, but in the nape of her neck an abundant coil of plaits reposes, and the colour of it is—golden. Not the pale flaxen hue which tints Nettie's curls and brows, but a bright warm ginger-gold, which shines with a greenish light when the sun is full upon it.

Theodosia's dress is made in the very latest fashion and is most elaborate; so is her position as she holds her mallet aloft, and is prepared to deal a death-blow to the ball, on which her well-shod foot reposes.

Nettie, ever on mischief bent, comes up at this *striking* moment, and as she says "Good-evening," she coolly possesses herself of Miss Braun's mallet, and crying: "I'll put your ball through the last hoop for you," suddenly accomplishes this feat.

Miss Braun is amazed and at a loss; she is not quite sure whether she ought to appear annoyed or delighted, but as she turns to acknowledge the salute of a gentleman who now approaches, the pleasant expression predominates on her irresolute face, and Theodosia strives to smile—and to blush. The latter is a hazardous experiment, and does not prove as successful as the ingenuous look of welcome she bestows on Mr. Peregrine Latimer.

Peregrine Latimer is one of nature's big men. He is tall and broad, and there is an air of self-assertion about him which is very impressive. He loves to have his own way always, and sets out with that determination to get it which

seldom fails, if backed by a strong will and an unswerving purpose. Those who are best acquainted with Latimer are convinced, without any discursive arguments on his part, that he assumes the control of circumstances, whereas ordinary mortals meekly allow circumstances to influence them.

Nature was certainly in a very liberal mood when she fashioned Peregrine Latimer. He is considerably above the middle height, and in breadth of shoulder and depth of girth also exceeds the average size of man. He makes the most of himself too; and, carrying his head well up, and his chest well forward, towers like a sturdy giant above ordinary mortals. His head is covered with a great quantity of waving snow-white hair, which he has a trick of tossing back with an odd jerk. His sonorous voice and the keen glance of his clear brown eyes command attention, while his genial laugh and ready wit provoke sympathetic hilarity.

Perhaps the fact of his being ever followed by a faithful admiring human shadow, adds to the important position which Mr. Latimer has assumed from the day of his first entrance into the Gardens, but all the startled inquiries as to who this merry giant really is, have as yet received no satisfactory reply.

The man who is most perseveringly cross-questioned on Latimer's account, and who has such a stock of general information to supply anent all the other Grenfellians, is one Jonathan Curtis, better known as "Johnny Pry." But even the ubiquitous Johnny was nonplussed when people asked him for particulars as to the social status of Mr. Latimer.

"He made his money in Australia, that is all I know, and quite enough too," was Johnny's unvarying statement.

Thus it became a recognised fact that Mr. Latimer had money.

This went for something, and the mystery still clinging about the great man did not diminish his popularity.

Was it this intangible atmosphere of secrecy, or mere animal magnetism, which so powerfully attracted Jonathan to Peregrine? Who shall say? Certain it is that, within a few days of Mr. Latimer's appearance on the Grenfellian scene, Johnny commenced that career of shadow-life which he consistently led ever after. Like Dr. Johnson's Boswell, Jonathan quoted all the sayings and doings of Mr. Latimer, and dilated on that gentleman's wit and wisdom until even the Norman girls, who had held aloof from the great stranger at first, became quite interested in these enthusiastic details.

Jonathan Curtis, with his patrimony, had been admitted as junior partner in Mr. Norman's flourishing business just before that gentleman's retirement from an active mercantile career; and Johnny, who was a special favourite with Mr. Norman, soon came to be regarded almost as one of the family, by the girls as well as their father.

Johnny entertained fond hopes of eventually substantiating this tie, for he loved Nettie with all the ardour of his restless and very inflammable nature.

Since the Normans had left their quiet country home and taken a house in London, Jonathan's somewhat dreary existence suddenly assumed quite a bright aspect, for he

now met the girls—met Nettie in the Gardens every day. Nettie had absorbed the sentimental portion of Jonathan's nature from his early boyhood, but in Mr. Latimer she now had a formidable though an unknown rival. All Jonathan's affection had long ago been bestowed on his former playmate, but the growing interest in daily life, in the doings and sayings of men of mark, was now centred in and sustained by Latimer.

What was said and done in the House of Commons and on the Stock Exchange became matter of intense interest to Johnny in these days, and Mr. Latimer was certainly a great authority on all subjects political or commercial.

Nettie, who smiled on all the world, smiled on her red-headed adorer also. Latimer was far too much absorbed by his private affairs to pay attention to any outsider; so he accepted Jonathan's homage passively, considering it as his due, no doubt.

After Nettie had wandered away to join the croquet-players, another Grenfellian seated herself by Mary's side. This was Mrs. Braun, the mother of Theodosia, and the owner of the house in which both Mr. Latimer and Jonathan were living.

Mrs. Braun was the widow of the late Herr Theodor Braun, of Mincing Lane, E.C., and 39, Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W.

Mrs. Braun, on the death of her husband, found herself in a dilemma. She was compelled to choose between two trying alternatives.

She knew she must either quit the mansion allotted to

her in her husband's will, and find a humbler abode to suit her means, or she must invite the public to assist her to remain in No. 39, for certain considerations to be explained presently.

Mrs. Braun was a bustling kind-hearted woman, a true type of the energetic German Hausfrau.

She had lately been snubbed and ridiculed by many of the Grenfellians, because she proved her good sense, and asserted her independence, by letting a portion of her enormous house to gentlemen engaged in business during the day.

To Theodosia this unconventional determination of her mother's was indeed a bitter blow, and many a wordy battle was fought by the two women on this subject.

Theodosia possessed a private fortune, and was an accomplished young lady, with much social ambition. Before the death of her father, Herr Theodor, Theodosia felt convinced that a residence in Great Grenfell Gardens, and the income of £500 a-year, entitled her to aspire to a husband who moved in quite an elevated sphere.

But as soon as Mrs. Braun declared her derogatory intention, and actually advertised for boarders, poor Theodosia knew that all her hopes were suddenly blighted, and the indignation she felt towards her mother knew no bounds.

The daughter's angry opposition forced Mrs. Braun to act independently in her new scheme, and she resolved to waste no further time in fruitless discussions. She therefore drew up her own advertisement without consulting her daughter, in terms well calculated to attract attention.

Theodosia's suspicions were lulled by her mother's silence, and she still cherished the hope that, should the subject be reopened, and her mother persevere in her craze, it might be so arranged that the boarders should assume the guise of visitors.

But all such fallacious hopes collapsed one morning when she took up *The Times*, where the following startling announcement met her mortified gaze:

"To gentlemen engaged in business during the day a pleasant home is offered in No. 39, Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W. Excellent references must be given. Cheerful musical society, and a bath."

It was that promise of a bath which put the finishing touch to the shame and dismay which filled poor Theodosia's fluttering bosom.

And yet it was the bath which had riveted the amazed attention of Mr. Latimer, who shortly after presented himself as a candidate for the enjoyments promised by the musical society at No. 39.

With the arrival of Peregrine, life once more assumed an inviting aspect to Theodosia.

His very card, which the inquisitive spinster eagerly snatched from the salver on which the servant was offering it to Mrs. Braun, suggested possibilities. How well "*Mrs.* Peregrine Latimer" would look upon the larger-sized pasteboard which custom has allotted to the representatives of the female portion of society!

Jonathan Curtis was attracted to No. 39 by the simple fact that it was next door to No. 40, the Normans' new home, and had taken up his residence with Mrs. Braun shortly before Mr. Latimer made his appearance there.

But Mrs. Braun has really been left an unconscionable time sitting by Mary Norman's side in the Gardens.

The old lady was deftly knitting the heel of an ever-new blue-worsted stocking, and she and Miss Norman were talking "servants," a subject of great moment to Mary, who, as her father's housekeeper, occasionally collided with her kitchen retinue.

Mrs. Braun was holding forth in broken English with all the eloquence the engrossing theme merited.

Mary was an especial favourite with the simple old lady, who unconsciously contrasted the thoughtful considerate Miss Norman with her own beloved Dosie, whose lack of domestic virtues and lofty social aspirations caused the good Hausfrau many an anxious sigh.

There were now two distinct parties engaged in games at the farther ends of the Gardens. To the left of Mrs. Braun was Theodosia's croquet set, and to the right the lawn-tennis party, headed by Nettie and Jonathan, who both excelled in a game requiring so much agility.

It must not be supposed that these factions included all the Grenfellians, many of whom viewed these social games with extreme dissatisfaction, as tending to intrude on the exclusiveness which some of them maintained, as though it were a national privilege.

"Who is dat gentleman which is just coming in from

the Grove, mine dear?" inquired Mrs. Braun, the click of her busy needles ceasing for a moment.

"I don't know him," answered Mary, glancing in the direction Mrs. Braun had indicated; but becoming aware of some special interest in the old lady's look and attitude, added: "Nettie or Jonathan is sure to know who he is, and all about him. I have never seen him before; I wonder if Estella knows him. Do you, Estella?" she continued, turning towards her sister. The embryo authoress looked up startled.

"Do I what?" she asked, displeased at the interruption.

She had been too thoroughly absorbed by her "notes" to heed what was going on about her; but as she turned to answer her sister's repeated inquiry, her own eyes rested upon the stranger who had just entered the Gardens from their tributary, the little Grenfell Grove.

The gentleman who had unconsciously become the cynosure of the three ladies, made his appearance in the Gardens for the first time this evening, though, as tenant of one of the pretty houses in the Grove, he was entitled to all the Grenfellian privileges.

He was a handsome man, and had an air of distinction which attracted and interested Estella.

"He is certainly not one of the commonplace set we usually see here," she remarked, and continued to take observations of the new comer; but this time the notes were mental, and did not require the aid of her pencil.

She saw a man above the middle height, who, either from lack of normal strength, or from the habit of bending

over books, or writing, was inclined to stoop; he carried his head slightly forward instead of erect.

He had attentive eyes, and used them too, but he was too far away for Estella to distinguish their colour, though she could see that his hair was turning gray.

"He looks too young to have gray hair," was Estella's mental comment on that fact.

The stranger now approached, and Estella observed the firmly-compressed lips, which gave an expression of great determination to his handsome face.

"You are here, are you, girls?" said a voice close to Estella's ear, and though she knew it was her father who spoke, she started visibly.

"Lost in day-dreams as usual, my dear?" asked Mr. Norman laughing.

Before Estella had time to speak the stranger had come up to Mr. Norman, with whom he shook hands very cordially.

Then Mr. Norman formally introduced his new acquaintance to the ladies as "Mr. St. Helier." By way of explanation he added: "It appears that Mr. St. Helier has been a near neighbour of ours for some time, though it was only to-day that a mutual friend, knowing us both as Grenfellians, made us personally acquainted at the Chesterfield Club."

Mr. Norman, by virtue of conservative parliamentary ambitions, had lately been elected a member of that political club.

Mr. St. Helier declined the seat Mrs. Braun offered him between Miss Norman and herself. Deprecating the

idea of crowding those ladies, he walked over to where Estella had established herself on the camp-stool.

"Are you sketching, Miss Norman?" he asks, furtively glancing at the pencil she holds in her hand, and then at the note-book, which she has hastily closed on his approach.

His innocent question evidently confuses Estella. She moves nervously away from his inquiring gaze, and getting dangerously near the edge of her camp-stool, suddenly loses her equilibrium, and to her dismay sees her note-book flying one way and her pencil the other, while she herself is planted on the ground between them.

Is there anything in life more treacherous than a camp-stool?

CHAPTER II.

THE FACE IN THE LOOKING-GLASS.

"Allow me," says St. Helier, rushing forward to help her, and then turning to rescue the treasures for which the girl extends eagerly trembling hands.

Indeed she is trembling all over.

"You are not hurt, I hope," says St. Helier, looking and speaking with the tenderest concern.

"No, not hurt, only very very much mortified," she answers ingenuously, and gratefully accepts the chair he now offers, *vice* the discarded camp-stool.

Her note-book has opened in falling, and a number of loose leaves have fluttered out of it upon the ground.

"A diary, I presume," remarks St. Helier smiling. He has gathered up the truant pages, and returns them to their owner as he speaks.

"No," answers Estella, flushing crimson, and painfully aware that this sudden rush of colour—a natural consequence of her previous confusion—has brought tears into her eyes.

St. Helier is evidently not satisfied with her simple negative, and she *feels* he is waiting for an explanation. With a sense of desperation she adds: "No, it is not a diary—only notes." And, as she speaks, Estella devoutly hopes this impromptu cross-examination may now cease.

But Mr. St. Helier is a lawyer by nature as well as by profession, and would belie his strongest instincts if he resisted his present inclination to discover the origin of the guilty blushes which are causing this pretty girl to quail beneath his coolly inquiring gaze.

"Notes?" he says, repeating her word with a curious intonation, which lends quite a new meaning to it. "What can a young lady of fashion like yourself have to do with anything so matter-of-fact and business-like as notes? You surely do not attend the lectures and classes at South Kensington?"

Estella begins to feel indignant with her pertinacious interlocutor, and has almost allowed a sharp reply to escape her lips, when she chances to look up into his face, and, meeting the kindly deprecating smile which hovers there, resolves to subdue her angry impulse, and smiling herself, says:

"The notes I am making are not by any means learned ones; they are intended for some writing of my own."

"Have I the honour of addressing an authoress, Miss Norman?" asks St. Helier, with a perfectly grave face.

Estella wonders if he can be laughing at her, but the serious gray eyes which meet her own so ingenuously deny that supposition.

The longer she looks into the handsome face, now animated by an expression of intense interest, the keener becomes her desire to confide the precious secret of her aspiring authorship to this fascinating stranger.

There is something in his voice which seems specially to appeal to her, a certain ring which thrills her sympathy.

It is the subtle power of that voice which compels her to speak unreservedly, and leads her on to this stammering confession:

"I have just begun to write a novel," she says, with all the sweet seriousness of a child who is attempting a new and difficult task.

"Allow me to congratulate you, and wish you every success," he says, with a courteous inclination of that handsome head on which Estella has already discovered great phrenological "possibilities."

Estella's education being modern English has, of course, embraced a little of everything that the brain is capable of holding with safety and sanity.

She thanks him cordially for his good wishes.

"May I inquire if you have a good plot?" he resumes, still watching her face with that odd grave look in his eyes.

"Do you consider plot as necessary?" she inquires dubiously; "I thought that was a very old-fashioned notion; real life has no plots, surely?"

He listens, but makes no comment.

"I certainly have not been troubled with any plots in *my* unchequered career," she continues; then with renewed interest asks: "Have you had a plot in yours? Tell me."

"There you are asking rather too much," he says; but, perceiving her sudden look of mortification, quickly adds: "You will excuse my questions, which I hope have not appeared impertinent, when I tell you why I take so great an interest in the fact of your writing. I have myself braved the fiery ordeal of print, so hoped I might perhaps be able to be of some slight assistance to you."

"You wrote a book!" exclaims Estella, with intense interest in her face and voice, which culminates with her next inquiry: "And was it published?"

"Even so," he replies smiling.

Estella is quite prepared to do a little cross-examination on her own account now, so, without any hesitation, continues: "Did you write in your own name?"

"No," says St. Helier; "when I made my first venture I was little more than a schoolboy, though I had taken honours at Cambridge. My editor—a wise man in his generation—entreated me to be reticent, and to reserve my name for the possibility of maturer work."

"Was it a novel you wrote?" pursues Estella with increasing sympathy, which is flushing her cheeks and lighting up her beautiful eyes.

"No," answers St. Helier, mentally endorsing that adjective. "My muse was of a more adventurous turn, and my first book a collection of poems."

"And did they make a sensation?" asks Estella promptly.

St. Helier is silent for a moment, and then smiles in an oddly dubious way which Estella thinks charming.

"I certainly received considerable encouragement and praise from all my friends," says the "Poet," omitting to mention how cruelly the press had belaboured him.

But he is evidently anxious to change the subject, so returns to Estella's enterprise by saying:

"But why won't you tell me what you mean to do about your novel without a plot, Miss Norman?"

Before Estella has had time to reply, which she was prepared to do at considerable length, Nettie returns flushed with exercise and victory.

She is closely followed by her allies, Messrs. Latimer and Curtis, who have come up to shake hands with the Misses Norman and their father. That gentleman, in compliance with Mrs. Braun's perfectly audible though whispered request, introduces his new friend to the "guests" at No. 39. Mischievous Nettie takes this opportunity to whisper anticipatory comments to Mary on Miss Theodosia's probable delight at the prospect of this new and eligible male acquaintance. Nettie herself is by no means overawed by Mr. St. Helier.

Estella listens to her youngest sister's lighthearted prattle in amazement, and almost envies the unblushing confidence

with which that baby addresses the stranger, of whom she coolly inquires which house in the Grove is his, how long he has lived there, why she, Nettie, has not seen him before to-night, etc. etc.

To the last inquiry he answers: "Because I have spent the last two months in Rome, and only now realise how much I have lost by that absence."

The implied compliment is at once appropriated and thoroughly appreciated by Nettie, who rushes off into a fresh string of inquiries, to all of which St. Helier replies with a ready good nature, which to Estella appears almost at variance with the dubious smile and the cynical tone which he had affected throughout his interview with herself.

"Who is this Mr. St. Helier?" Mary inquires, when the shades of evening have sent all the Grenfellians indoors.

The Norman family are assembled in their comfortable drawing-room, where the shutters are closed, the lamps lighted, and the girls just settling to their respective occupations. "Yes, who is this Mr. St. Helier?" Nettie echoes, mimicking her sister's very measured tone, and seating herself with a bound on her father's knee, so that she may have a better opportunity for compelling attention and answers from him, who, in the evening, is mostly too tired to bestow either on his girl's "prattle."

But he is quite aware that Nettie will insist on an answer to Mary's inquiry, so, politely endeavouring to stifle a yawn, he repeats: "Who is this Mr. St. Helier? Well, Ferguson, who introduced him to me at the Chesterfield, tells me he is the only son of the great Sir George St. Helier, who distin-

guished himself in the Crimea. The young man's physique prevented him from following in the martial footsteps of his father; but though he was a delicate youth, he had a laudable ambition, and as he does not possess sufficient wealth to enable him to live in the luxurious idleness most men affect who rely on their high connections to keep them afloat, this St. Helier elected to study for the Bar, where he has already made a name for himself."

"I was sure he had a fine character," says Mary; "he looks like the son of a distinguished father, and bears the impress of an elevated soul upon his brow."

Mary is addicted to grandiloquent language, and Nettie often watches and listens to her sister in amazed admiration, but mostly manages to coax her down from her stilts, as now—for she says:

"Spare yourself the agitation necessary for the enunciation of such magnificent sentiments, pretty Poll, and let father tell us something more about this 'Hero of Romance.' He is not ill now, father, is he?" she continues, utterly regardless of Mary's frown of displeasure.

"No, you saucy puss," says her father, pretending to slap her bonny face; "he is not ill, but a sedentary life and diligent study are certainly telling upon him. How old should you think he is, Mary?"

"Nearly forty," says Mary promptly, and evidently means to desist from any unnecessary comment.

"He looks so," replies Mr. Norman; "and yet he is barely five-and-thirty—reading certainly ages a man prematurely."

"I don't care how old or how young he is," cries Nettie enthusiastically. "I know I think him a sweet, sad-looking, fascinating darling—there! pretty Poll. Yes, pretty Poll! I *do*, and you may look as shocked as ever you like."

Nettie, a true child of nature, loves where she does not hate, and bestrews mankind generally with gushing adjectives.

Estella makes no comment of any kind, but there is a silence which, to the initiated, may be more eloquent than words.

Presently, while Mary and Nettie are still pursuing their comments and inquiries, Estella rises and, pleading unusual fatigue, wishes her father and sisters good-night, and hurries away to her own room, anxious to be alone with her teeming thoughts, which seem to be getting wildly entangled with the "Notes" for the novel in her active brain.

Bent on wholly giving herself up to the pleasures of retrospection, Estella resolves to have physical as well as mental liberty, and to this end desires speedily to free her body from the trammels of conventional clothing, so with trembling fingers she unbuttons and unlaces her garments, and has soon exchanged her closely-fitting "Princesse robe" for the luxurious ease of a cambric dressing-gown, over which the curling masses of her dark hair fall in a heavy shower.

Her candles are a-light, and as she moves to and fro in her pretty rose-hung chamber, she catches sight of her shining eyes as they gleam from one looking-glass to another.

Estella loves brightness, and to give this to her room she has coaxed Mary to have three mirrors placed in it. Suddenly she starts, and, after a moment's frightened pause, approaches the cheval-glass, in the deep reflections of which she fancies she perceives—a face.

She snatches up a candle, and, holding it above her head, peers eagerly into the deceptive mirror, where her own pale face and startled eyes alone confront her.

That dim vision, with the serious glance and the cynical smile, has returned to the overwrought imagination, which had but conjured up a visible sign of its eager working.

"How clever he must be, how handsome he is, how cool and indifferent," Estella ponders, commenting on the original of that mirrored vision.

Then she recalls all that was said between them. "He promised to help me with my book," she remembers; "and he has had so much experience himself. With a little assistance from a clever man, I know I could accomplish a great deal; and if he really should care about my work, give me some practical hints, and take an interest in what I do, I feel sure I could write a novel worthy of the acceptance of the first publisher in the land. Oh! I wonder when I shall see Mr. St. Helier again!" She interrupts herself as a tangle in the hair she is vigorously combing suddenly and roughly recalls her to the present and her toilet operations.

This diversion in the current of her thoughts also arouses her to the fact that she is dwelling on her first conversation with a stranger in a most extraordinary manner. "Can this be love?" the youthful philosopher questions herself severely.

"Is this infatuation which makes me see him everywhere, hear him, and think of him only, a symptom of what people call 'Love at first sight?' If so, I ought to try and analyse my feelings while they are spontaneous and genuine, and make proper notes of them. How useful they will be to me when I am trying to explain Gwendolen's first love." (Gwendolen, dear reader, is the name of Estella's embryo heroine.) Estella actually seizes her pencil, but oh! how can she reduce the contending emotions which flush her face and set her heart beating, to an orderly procession of commonplace words, to be written on foolscap paper with blue lines! The matter-of-fact contact of those materials sobers Estella, and she feels quite convinced that this new experience of hers is not love at all, but merely the feelings of hope and gratitude which agitated her as she realised the possibilities of writing a successful novel under the tuition of her new and accomplished guide to literature.

"Oh when shall I see him again?" whispers the dreaming Estella to that other reflected Estella, who is sternly confronting her in the looking-glass, and to whom she repeats with emphasis: "I don't want to see him for his sake or mine, only to get such hints from him as will fairly start me with my first volume, which I am so very very anxious to begin now." Both Estellas start visibly again, as a rapid knock at the bedroom-door is heard.

"Estella, let me in, I want you!" cries Nettie, and vainly rattles at the handle of the door, which Estella now reluctantly unlocks.

"Oh Nettie! why do you disturb me at this uncanny

hour?" asks Estella, stifling a yawn, and rubbing her eyes, which have suddenly assumed a very sleepy look. "I told you I was tired, and intended to go straight to bed."

"Which starting resolution you appear to have abandoned as soon as you were by yourself, and able to have a good think undisturbed."

"Nettie, of course I am always glad to give a quiet hour to my notes at night, as you know."

"Oh yes! I know," cries Nettie, lifting her dress in her extended fingers, and performing an impromptu *pas seul* before the cheval-glass. "Can you balance yourself on the tippiest tips of your toekins like this, Stella?" she continues, suiting the action to the words in a very surprising manner, and breaking forth into a thrilling roulade of laughter, which certainly extends over two octaves.

"Nettie!" cries Estella severely, and vainly endeavours to frown as she speaks. "Nettie! have you come up here solely to play the fool?"

"Miss Estella Norman, I confess I feel deeply hurt and surprised to hear you make use of so ill-judged, so unladylike a figure of speech," says Nettie, and so accurately imitates the languid manner and affected drawl of Theodosia Braun, that Estella's attempted frown melts into a smile as she says:

"Nettie, I really have some work to do to-night; so be off, there's a dear baby."

"What!" exclaims Nettie, in affected surprise, "do you think I am going to leave you to make your notes on

that delicious Mr. St. Helier without a word of sisterly advice from me? Oh no! Miss Stella, I take considerable pride in your reputation as an authoress, and therefore I must insist on superintending you while you write your opening chapter. I know you are quite ready to begin to-night, as you have found a really suitable hero to-day. Of course you could not start properly until you had a model for the Honourable Reginald Somerset. I've settled that that is to be his name, and he is worthy of it. You can make him exactly like Mr. St. Helier, only he must have luxuriant chestnut hair with a lovely wave in it. Mr. St. Helier's iron-gray locks are not romantic enough."

"Perhaps you would like me to present my hero with a flowing white mane, like that of which Mr. Latimer is so proud?" suggested Estella.

"Oh! do not scorn the signs of time and trouble upon that noble candid brow," says Nettie, still looking and speaking like a small duplicate of Theodosia Braun.

"I see I can do no good while you are here, Nettie," Estella pleads with an impatient sigh; "won't you leave me in peace and go to your own room now, dearie?"

"Poor old pet!" cries Nettie, flinging her arms around her sister's neck, and covering her face with a profusion of small kisses. "You're too good to be bullied, Stella, and I'll take my departure, but first I must tell you a bit of perfectly delicious news—news you will be so pleased to hear, that you'll bless me for coming up at once to tell it to you. Guess now. I'll give you a leading hint. It's something quite too awfully nice about father and Mr. St. Helier."

Estella has flushed so hotly as Nettie speaks, that the girl determines to put an end to her sister's anxious suspense without further delay, so with concentrated emphasis announces this startling fact:

"Father, Mary, and I have settled to give a dinner-party, and you are to write the invitations to-morrow morning."

"Really! And is Mr. St. Helier to be invited?" asks Estella, with a look that says: "This seems too good to be true."

"It is quite true indeed," says Nettie, fully aware of the interest with which Estella is now listening to her.

"We are to be eight. Father suggested ten, but Mary struck, and said she could not possibly undertake to provide for more than eight. As it is, she must get Mrs. Braun to help us with the cheese *soufflé* and the vanilla cream, for we are all quite sure our Mrs. Cook is not up to 'hanythink out of the common, mum,' though she did declare herself to be 'reg'lar professed.'"

"But surely Mrs. Braun won't be asked to dine?" inquires Estella, and fancies she sees Mr. St. Helier's dubious smile at the moment of his introduction to that lady.

"No! poor old soul, that wouldn't suit her or us," Nettie explains; "but Mary and I are going to see her, and we'll coax her to come over in the morning and help us. She'll think that a far greater pleasure than being one of the party, and she always declares her dear Dosie does 'far more credit to any society than she ever could.'"

"There's some truth in that," says Estella, and adds: "Now tell me all the rest. Dosie and we three girls, father, Mr. St. Helier, and——"

"Latimer and Co., of course. That makes eight. Mary is quite in a twitter at the notion of our first dinner-party in town. She says it is all so different here to our Oakhurst parties, where father was Squire, and the Doctor and the Curate and all those good people thought it an honour to come and have 'a bit of mutton' with us. Now she will have to get soup, and fish, and entrées, and all sorts of kickshaws, and Mary evidently feels as if she had to provide for the entire population of the Gardens. Bring down your best J pen with you in the morning, Stella, and be prepared to write the invitations in your most characteristic hand, for I am sure Mr. St. Helier will ask me which of us has written the notes. He told me he judged character by handwriting to-day, and made all sorts of inquiries about you while you were entertaining Mr. Latimer with that amazing summary of the 'Sceptical Review.'"

"What did Mr. St. Helier want to know about me?" asks Estella, tempted by the ripe-cherry look of Nettie's lips to impress a sudden kiss upon them.

"Perhaps I'll tell you all about that to-morrow, my dearest," says Nettie laughing. "At present I feel it would be cruel to keep you up any longer, for I know how very tired you are."

It is now Nettie's turn to yawn and rub her eyes, and all Estella's blandishments fail to wrest another word from

the teazing little sister, who goes away to her small sky-parlour in perfect good-humour with the world in general, and herself in particular. She is soon deep in the happy dreamless sleep which night brings to healthy babies like herself.

On Mary the troubles of an anxious housekeeper sat heavily, and her dreams were perturbed by visions of Theodosia bearing a capsized vanilla cream upon a tennis-bat, while Mr. Latimer drew a champagne cork, roaring with laughter all the time, and Mr. St. Helier seemed to be looking on at these proceedings with grave displeasure. Poor Mary quite moaned in her sleep at the untoward aspect affairs were assuming.

As for Estella, she could not sleep at all for many a weary hour.

When the first glimmer of dawn began to peep through her rose-coloured curtains she resolutely turned her back to the light, closed her eyes, and prayed for sleep, which came at last, having been wooed by the repetition of the question: "When shall I see him again?" which by monotonous iteration became a lullaby to the weary, anxious, impressionable girl.

CHAPTER III.

A FEW FRIENDS TO DINNER.

THERE was now a subject of engrossing interest absorbing the thoughts of the Norman girls, and that was the

approaching dinner-party, and the guests to be assembled on the auspicious Thursday decided upon for the great event. "Who would accept, and whose reply would arrive first?" were the questions Nettie put to her sisters at regular intervals, and with especial emphasis when the postman's knock freshly aroused her anticipations. But the third morning post arrived, and yet no answer was brought to the invitations Estella had written with her very best pen.

"I am half afraid Theodosia will refuse, unless we go in and explain matters to Mrs. Braun," said Mary anxiously.

"We'll go, you and I, Mary dear," replied Nettie, who was always ready for action.

"I think I may be able to manage better without you, Baby," Mary answered cautiously.

"Don't trouble to think about it, Polly, for I am determined to come," replied Nettie laughing, and ran off to fetch the hat she habitually wore on her shoulders.

It was early in the afternoon when Mary and her madcap sister knocked at the door of No. 39.

Kind-hearted Mrs. Braun received them with the cordiality which specially distinguished her in her own house, for it was her delight to prove her hospitality to any guests.

"Oh, my dear children!" she cried, "you are just too late for the lonch. Vy did you not come one liddel half-hour before? I had made a *choufleur au gratin* to-day, and it was so a success that even Mr. Latimer confess it was the best he ever tasted. And he has lived in Paris, you know."

"Has he?" said Mary. "I thought he came from Australia."

"It was in Australia he had many sheeps, and there he made his money," said Mrs. Braun.

At this graphic explanation Nettie had the greatest difficulty in suppressing an overwhelming desire to laugh.

"His sheep certainly appear to have had golden fleeces," she said.

"Do you mean those yellow fleas what burry demselves in the sheeps, my dear?" asked Mrs. Braun, who thought Nettie was alluding to a parasite, about which a controversy was raging in the daily papers just then.

At this totally unexpected interpretation of her classical allusion Nettie fairly exploded.

Poor Mrs. Braun felt and showed great discomfiture at this untoward merriment, and Nettie, conscience-stricken, ransacked her brain to try and find some plausible excuse for her hilarity. But Mrs. Braun was painfully aware that she must have committed some verbal indiscretion, and all the more readily acquiesced in Mary's gentle apologies for not inviting Mrs. Braun to the party on Thursday.

"Papa and I intended this little dinner to be a pleasure to our young people," Mary explained, assuming the air of a grandmother.

"Oh yes! I quite understand, and that is just what my dear Dosie will enjoy so thoroughly," said Mrs. Braun. "Poor child! she has so few pleasures for one of her age," continued the fond mother; "and yet you know she was very contrary with me for wishing to make our own

home more cheerful for her by having nice gentlemen to board with us."

"But she is quite reconciled to that fact now, Mrs. Braun?" asked Nettie, who was longing to ascertain that the old lady had quite forgiven her for her ill-timed laughter. Nettie would never wilfully have hurt the feelings of any one, least of all this kind good-tempered old woman, for whom the girl had as great a regard as Mary herself.

"Yes, my dear," replied Mrs. Braun, who bore no malice. "Yes, I do think my goot Dosie is more satisfied with her old mother since Mr. Latimer is come, and his great voice makes fresh life in the house. Then he always brings back some news from town every day."

"What is his business really?" inquired Nettie. "I ask Jonathan every time I see him, but though he shakes his stupid old head, and tries to look very wise, he really knows nothing at all about his 'honoured friend's' occupation in the City."

Miss Braun entered the room at this moment, and told Mary how gladly she accepted her kind invitation for Thursday.

"Mr. Latimer told me he would be delighted to go too," she added; "but I suppose you have heard from him?"

"No," said Nettie promptly; "but we were just speaking about him. I do wish that you, Miss Braun, who are more in his confidence than any one else, would tell us who and what he is."

Theodosia simpered and pressed her lace handkerchief tenderly to her lately rouged lips.

"I don't know why you should assume that I am in Mr. Latimer's confidence, Nettie my dear," she said deprecatingly. But Nettie was quite aware that her last remark had given her a lift in Miss Braun's estimation, and determined to continue in the same vein, which she found very amusing.

"I'll tell you why I think so," she said pouting. "Because he is always ready to talk to you and to listen to you, whereas he invariably snubs Mary and me."

"Nettie!" cried Mary, thoroughly amazed by this rash statement of her sister's; "don't talk such nonsense, child, or at all events speak for yourself only. For my part, I must say that Mr. Latimer has always behaved to me with unexceptionable courtesy."

"Mary is jealous," was Theodosia's instant reflection, while her mother remarked: "You are quite right, Miss Norman, Mr. Latimer is polite to all the ladies, for he is a true gentleman. His bankers gave him a very goot character when I wrote for references, and he pays his bill before the time always."

"Oh mamma, don't!" protested Theodosia, lifting her long hands in deprecation.

"Mine child, why shall I not praise the man's honesty when I find it is goot? You are too proud, mine Dosie, much too proud, and you shall not be ashamed of your poor old mother, who is doing all things for your true goot, my dear. Don't you know why I want to save all the money I have got, mine child, and that I try to get more to put with it? It is for that I keep up this great house and have my boarders, not for mine-self at all, but to make your pleasure

now, and to leave more by-and-by for your girls and boys when you are a happy wife and mother. Is not dat the right thing, Miss Norman?"

"I am quite sure you are always bent on kind thoughts, dear Mrs. Braun," said Mary, taking the old lady's seamed and horny hand in both her own.

"And that is why we have ventured to come and ask ever so many favours of you, dear Mrs. Braun," interpolated Nettie, by way of introducing the culinary requests.

"Yes, Mrs. Braun, I certainly have come to ask a great favour of you to-day," supplemented Mary, with an appealing glance at her kind old friend. "You know how ignorant I am of the true science of cookery," she continued, "though dear father thinks so much of that accomplishment, which you so thoroughly understand in all its branches. This makes me realise my incapacity the more. Well, I am most anxious to make our little dinner a great success, and I want your advice and your help."

"All I can give you, my dear child, I will, most glad," replied Mrs. Braun eagerly; "and if your cook is not too much a fine lady to permit me, I will come round on Thursday afternoon and bring my big apron with me, and show her how to set about the Delikatessen, which want quite as much care as a painting or a piece of embroidery."

"Mamma!" remonstrated Theodosia, who probably intended to prevent her mother from undertaking the degrading office of superintending Miss Norman's cookery. But ere she had time to continue her remonstrance, she heard the familiar click of a certain latch-key, and following some

sudden impulse, she opened the piano and at once dashed into the most brilliant of valses brillantes.

Mr. Latimer, hearing these inspiriting sounds as he hung up his hat in the hall, gratefully felt that they were intended as a pleasant welcome for him.

Presently he entered the drawing-room and thanked Theodosia for the attention with a beaming smile. She saw it, felt she was appreciated at last, and resolved to do all that lay in her power to secure the esteem of this greatest and noblest of men.

Mr. Latimer then perceived Miss Norman and Nettie, and having shaken hands with them both, handed a note to the former, which he said he had omitted to post.

"We may hope to see you, I trust?" said Mary, who had managed to have a whispered consultation with Mrs. Braun, and who now took her leave followed by Nettie.

As soon as the door of 39 was closed behind them, Nettie gave Mary "a specimen" of the confidential duologue between Dosie and Mr. Latimer, to which Nettie had lent her concentrated attention while Mary listened to Mrs. Braun's hints on cookery.

"Do you think dear Dosie will ask us to be bridesmaids if she really manages to persuade Mr. Latimer to marry her?" inquired saucy Nettie, and was told by Mary that it was a great pity she had not yet learnt the good old lesson, that little girls should be seen and not heard.

"That may be true, no doubt," said Nettie, "but I was never told not to listen to my elders and betters. On the contrary, it is considered respectful so to do."

"I give you up as incorrigible in every sense," said Mary smiling.

"You won't like it a bit when you have to give me up really, Polly—no, not even to the very nicest husband in all the world."

On this Mary placed her arm tenderly around her youngest sister's shoulder, and they entered their house together and went straight to the study where Estella was sitting before a pile of MS. paper, evidently very much preoccupied by her "notes."

"Well, Mrs. Glum," cried Nettie, "why don't you ask after our sweet Dosie?"

Estella handed a note to Mary, but said never a word.

"How did this come?" inquired Mary.

"He left it with his compliments," said Estella in a broken voice.

"Oh! it's from Mr. St. Helier, and he came here and she never saw him, poor Stella!" cried Nettie, in a tone of profound commiseration.

"Don't be absurd, Nettie," said Estella, with considerable asperity.

"Of course I was annoyed that Chapman did not tell Mr. St. Helier I was at home. I was upstairs, and she thought I had gone out, it appears. I did not care in the least whether I saw him or not, but I did wish to talk to him about my novel, for he promised to help me with the opening chapters."

"Don't apologise, my dear, we quite understand, don't we, Mary?" said Nettie.

Estella took no notice of this assurance, but turning to Mary, asked:

"What does he say in the note?"

Nettie was by this time peering over Mary's shoulder at the important document.

"What a lovely hand he writes!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, there is plenty of character in that," commented Estella admiringly.

"I am so glad he is coming," said Mary; "his culture will leaven our party, which, after all, is composed of very commonplace members of society. He must take you in to dinner, Estella," she added presently, "you are the only one that is able to talk to him properly."

Estella was silent, but she keenly apprèciated the great tact her elder sister was displaying on this occasion.

"And am I to be told off to poor old Johnny Pry?" asked Nettie, making a wry face.

"Certainly you are, you very ungrateful little girl," said her father, who had entered the room during this discussion.

He was a well-built, handsome man, who carried his fifty years jauntily, and having made his fortune as a colonial merchant, was quite willing now to spend it in making life agreeable to his daughters and himself.

He had already set apart a marriage portion for each of his girls, and there was another reserve-fund intended some day to supply him with the sinews of war necessary for the fighting of a constituency. It was the dearest wish of Mr. Norman's heart to see the magic letters M.P. added to his name, and he felt as if his election to the Chesterfield Club

was already a stride in that direction, and an earnest of future success.

"Are you going to take 'my dear Dosie' in to dinner, father?" asked Nettie, quoting Mrs. Braun.

"Certainly I am," said her father; "you did not expect me to solicit the honour of your hand, you saucy minx, did you?" Then turning to Mary he added: "You will go with Mr. St. Helier, my dear, as he is the greatest stranger, and so very highly connected."

Nettie glanced across at Estella, who was about to speak, but suddenly realised that, in the present emotional state of her feelings, discretion would be the better part of valour.

She was soon rewarded for her prudent silence, for Mary said:

"We have just settled it all, father dear, and as I feel sure everything is arranged with a view to the comfort and enjoyment of our guests, you will, I hope, let me have my own way this time."

"Certainly, my dear," replied Mr. Norman, who thoroughly appreciated the sound good sense of which his "modest Mary" had given him so many proofs.

"You were speaking of Mr. St. Helier's high connections just now, father dear," said Nettie. "I wonder what sort of connections that magnificent Mr. Latimer can boast of?"

"I should be very glad if I could give a satisfactory reply to that question, my baby," said her father laughing; "indeed I have already regretted my weakness in yielding to this mad scheme of yours in giving this dinner-party, and inviting a couple of men to my house of whom I know literally nothing."

"That can hardly apply to Mr. St. Helier, father," suggested Mary quietly, "since from your own accounts his position is very clearly defined and irreproachable."

"True; but who and what is Mr. Latimer?"

"Something in the City," suggested Nettie, in a very impressive tone.

"That is eminently satisfactory, certainly," said Mr. Norman laughing.

"He made all his money in Australia," said Mary.

"Fleecing many sheeps," added Nettie, with a strong German accent.

"Mostly two-legged sheeps," remarked Estella, at which Mr. Norman laughed again. Presently he added drily, but not without a smile:

"I think, my girls, you are all sufficiently on your guard to defend yourselves from making an intimate friend of this Mr. Latimer at present. Let us know a little more about him at all events, before we treat him as we do his most devoted admirer, our good Jonathan."

The momentous day arrived at last, and was passed by the three girls in making preparations for the feast, each one according to her special qualifications; Mary, of course, devoted her time and her energies to attending upon Mrs. Braun and the cook downstairs.

Estella arranged the piano, its candles, and the music-books. She brought down some of the art treasures from her own sky-parlour, too, with a view to ornamenting the drawing-room, and also produced her album of celebrities, *pro bono publico.* Having settled all this to her own

satisfaction, Estella went to assist Nettie in the floral decorations of the dinner-table.

There was a little discussion between the girls *à propos* of placing "button-holes" in specimen glasses for each guest. Estella opined that this was a vulgar idea, on which Nettie declared that nothing could be more subtle and refined than the language of flowers. This remark sounded worthy of a line in a novel, and at once overcame Estella's prejudices.

Acting on her young sister's advice, she placed some sprays of lily of the valley by the side of Mr. St. Helier's elaborately-turreted serviette, while Nettie, with a knowing smile, wired up a fine yellow rose-bud for Miss Theodosia.

"You had better give Johnny a rose-pink; that will suit his delicate complexion to a T!" Estella suggested, and added, "Father shall have this glorious damask rose, bless him!" and then she placed a strongly-scented gardenia for Mr. Latimer. "Like must to like," she said laughing, "and Mr. Latimer's characteristic is power."

"But not subtlety," said Nettie, on whom that word had evidently made an impression.

The guests, who had not far to come, arrived with startling punctuality, and caused a sudden commotion in the kitchen as well as in the drawing-room.

The "quarter-hour," which is always specially "bad" on these occasions, ticked out its endless seconds to the eagerly-listening hostess of No. 40, who sat in speechless misery wondering what could have happened to cook—a new cook too!

Chapman, the parlour-maid, entered the room at last and announced that "dinner was served."

The very words set Mary's heart palpitating; the courses hurried before her mind's eye like sins before judgment. Soup, fish, entrées, how would they all turn out? she wondered, as she held back while her father led Theodosia downstairs, and the rest followed in the order agreed upon.

Miss Braun was in the highest spirits; she felt that she was looking her best, and that the rose-pink satin which fell in graceful folds about her lanky figure became her admirably, while the delicate laces about her throat hid the ravages time had made there, and softened the outline of chin and cheek.

Quite at ease as regarded herself, Miss Braun was able to bestow considerable attention on others. Her first thought was one of admiration for Mr. Norman, whose distinguished air impressed her for the first time. She remembered that he was a man of means and position, and it suddenly occurred to her that it would not be an ignoble ambition to obtain Mary's place at the head of Mr. Norman's table, and of his handsome establishment.

"Would the girls offer much opposition?" Theodosia wondered as she dipped her spoon into the soup, and tasting it, suddenly changed her reflections to the comment, "How very nasty!"

Theodosia was evidently not the only person who found the soup unpalatable; Mr. Norman likewise laid his spoon down, and looked first at his daughter, then at his guests, in undisguised consternation.

"Mary, my love, what can have happened to the soup?" he inquired, with a peculiar twitching of his gray eyebrows, which Nettie always described as father's "storm-signal."

Poor Mary, from the first sip of her *potage à la reine*, became aware that the creamy-looking contents of her plate, so pleasing to the eye, were horrid as the proverbial Dead-sea apples to the taste, for the soup was burnt.

Mary, in speechless agony, glanced at her sisters. Estella's face was slightly flushed, but she made no other sign. Nettie, however, was very much disgusted by the painful silence about her, and clearing her throat, proceeded to what she deemed a necessary explanation.

"It isn't poor Mary's fault the least little bit, father," said Nettie bravely; "it's all the new cook! She's troublesome and gives herself airs as being 'reg'lar professed, mum'" (here Nettie, of course, mimicked the cook to the life), "and she wouldn't listen to anything Mary told her, but got very cross, and I believe she has burnt the soup out of spite—*there!*"

Nettie laughed and so did the men, but Mary looked at her madcap sister with an expression of such appealing misery, that it almost silenced her—almost—for Nettie could not resist adding: "I won't say another word now, I promise you, Polly dear; but I could not sit by and hear you blamed when it's no fault of yours; there now, I have really finished, and I beg everyone's pardon for being so forward."

Mary vaguely stammered her apologies for the spoiling of the "potage," whereupon her guests all assured

her it was "not so bad." The more adventurous even struggled on with their spoons, but unable to endure the martyrdom their good manners imposed, soon relinquished the attempt, and allowed Chapman to carry off the spoil.

The elder sisters felt miserable at this untoward commencement, and refused to be comforted until the fish appeared, which was as good as fish could be. This was a reprieve, and appreciated as such.

"I do wish you would do us the honour to join us at lawn-tennis to-morrow, Miss Norman," said Mr. Latimer, by way of leading the conversation into the "Gardens," a subject of inexhaustible interest to all Grenfellians.

Mary appreciated the kind intention, and to prove her gratitude, said she really would try and play *some day*. On hearing this Mr. Latimer at once launched forth into an animated discourse on his favourite method of handling the bats.

Miss Braun meanwhile was bringing the full battery of her arch glances and her tender smiles to bear on Mr. Norman, who in the most secret recesses of his mind vaguely wondered "what the d—— the old girl was ogling him in that way for?"

But notwithstanding these unfavourable mental comments, Mr. Norman was speaking to and smiling at "the old girl" with that bland and perfect courtesy for which he had been renowned all his life.

The charming manner of her host, and his marked attention, gratified Theodosia extremely, and made her feel that she was thoroughly mistress of the situation on this

occasion. Indeed, it began to seem to her that she had but to make her own choice between the three delightful men with whom she was now brought into such confidential relations.

There was Mr. Norman, who evidently admired her personal appearance; there was that dear noble Mr. Latimer, who valued her accomplishments and her *savoir faire*; and then there was the new man, St. Helier, who was so "highly connected."

He appeared to be a charming man though proud, and just now he was evidently bored by Estella, who always persisted in talking about things women are not supposed to understand. No doubt she was worrying Mr. St. Helier "awfully," by expounding her new-fangled notions on art and literature. Such was Theodosia's impression, and she at once resolved to give Estella's *victim* the chance of diverting his attention to a worthier object (herself). So she pointedly addressed a leading question to him: "I hope, Mr. St. Helier, you share my admiration for the Rev. Æneas Crooke," said she, and she faced round upon Mr. St. Helier as she mentioned the name of that popular divine whom all London was flocking to hear at that time.

"I have never had the honour of having heard or seen the Rev. Crooke, either in or out of the pulpit, Miss Braun," said St. Helier, and his tone betrayed no particular inclination for any such interview. Turning towards his neighbour again, he said: "I beg your pardon, Miss Estella, you were saying——?"

"That I consider every author should endeavour to

inculcate some moral lesson, by his or her writing," said Estella, rejoicing a little at the polite but decided snubbing that "affected old Theodosia" had just received.

"These are very ingenuous and most delightful sentiments, Miss Estella, and they do equal credit to your head and your heart," said St. Helier, with that dubious smile of his, which provoked while it charmed Estella. When he smiled like that, she always feared he was laughing at her, but if she looked for confirmation into his eyes, she felt sure that she could discern serious admiration in them.

"I really think you will have to begin by educating your public to understand you," he continued.

"Truth must carry conviction," said she.

"It may if it is put pleasantly," he answered; "if not, the mass of readers would prefer unmitigated fiction."

"Oh! Mr. St. Helier, I begin to fear you are a heartless cynic," said Estella, looking seriously apprehensive.

"Then you do me a grevious wrong," said he, "and are yourself very far from the truth for once."

Estella stifled an impatient sigh; there was so much she would have liked to say to this man, if only he had really been the old friend she would have liked to consider him. But when she remembered that this was only the second time they had met, she became alarmed at her own temerity, and with a sudden impulse resolved to avoid touching on the topics most interesting to herself at present. Just as she came to this decision she looked across at Nettie, and drew St. Helier's attention to the "Baby," who certainly was in her glory on this occasion.

She had Jonathan on one hand, and Peregrine Latimer on the other, and they were both exerting themselves to the utmost to entertain her.

When the party first entered the dining-room, there had been a slight disturbance, for it was discovered that the magic number of *eight*, famed as the one which ought to rule all social dinners, had one decided drawback, for no amount of promenading around the table would enable Mr. Norman and Mary to take their due positions at the top and bottom of the festive board, unless two ladies sat at one corner and two gentlemen at the other.

St. Helier and Nettie were the gainers in either case, and Nettie made the most of her two cavaliers, for Mary was far too anxious about her dinner to advance beyond monosyllables in her conversation with Mr. Latimer, who at the best of times did not interest her particularly, and who appeared most trying to her patience on this occasion.

This, however, was really no fault of Peregrine's, who did his utmost to entertain his hostess, and talked vociferously, both on the question of lawn-tennis and also on the latest *on-dits* he had picked up in the Gardens; when he found, however, that his conversational efforts were neither responded to nor appreciated by his taciturn hostess, he turned to Nettie in despair, and did not turn in vain. For Nettie was neither nervous nor bashful, and felt quite equal to entertaining half-a-dozen gentlemen, should such a task fall to her lot.

Jonathan was in his glory. Sure of a sympathetic audience, he interlarded his conversation with puns to

such an alarming extent, that whatever sense his remarks might have had originally was utterly obliterated by his far-fetched efforts at wit, a gift poor Jonathan always aspired to, but which Dame Nature had cruelly denied him. The cruelty in this case was towards Jonathan's friends, who were made to suffer by his constant striving to appear funny, which in his case proved a melancholy failure. Never was hostess more delighted than Miss Norman, when she knew the time had come for her to make a sign to the senior lady, who rose obedient to the summons, and somewhat regretfully left her host's side.

"We are going to leave you gentlemen to talk shop now," said Nettie pertly. She had approached Mr. Norman to pick up his *serviette*, which had fallen at his side unperceived, and took this opportunity of pressing her lips on his head *en passant*.

"You and Mr. Latimer can talk stocks, can't you, father dear?" she said. "And sheep and golden fleeces too," she added mischievously; "and Mr. St. Helier will give you a legal opinion without charging 6s. 8d. for it, and Jonathan can be the secretary, so you will have a regular committee meeting—there now, haven't I settled it all nicely for you?"

"You saucy baby, I must really teach you to respect the secrets of the prison-house," said Mr. Norman, holding up a reproving finger.

Mr. Latimer, instead of laughing with his usual hilarity, looked vexed.

Jonathan rushed to open the door for the departing

ladies. Theodosia thanked him with a patronising smile, and Nettie knew there was no time for her to enter into an argument with frowning Mr. Latimer, as she would dearly have liked to do. But as she passed Jonathan she whispered:

"Now, mind you don't sit there till you are all sleepy and stupid."

"I die until we meet again," he returned extravagantly.

"Silence, you great gander!" was Nettie's unsentimental reply through the chink of the door as he closed it.

CHAPTER IV.

IN THE DRAWING-ROOM.

MISS BRAUN and Mary meanwhile walked towards the drawing-room in solemn state.

"What can mamma have been thinking of to let your cook send up such vile soup?" whispered Theodosia, coming down from her grande-dame stilts with a leap which rather startled Mary, who, most unswervingly consistent herself, could not understand such rapid changes in others.

Two days ago Miss Braun appeared mightily indignant at the notion of her mamma's being asked to give a little advice and assistance in the kitchen; to-day the unnatural daughter was quite ready to blame her mamma for the shortcomings of the cook.

"Dear Mrs. Braun has been most patient and kind," protested Mary; "it is entirely thanks to her that the entrées and the sweets proved a success."

"As she chose to take the responsibility on her shoulders, she ought to have seen to everything properly," said Theodosia crossly; "such a *contretemps* would never have happened at our house, and of course Mr. Latimer visited his displeasure upon me. Mamma could not be induced to keep her own counsel, and actually confided to Mr. Jonathan that she had been invited to cook your dinner for you!"

At this humiliating avowal Mary flushed with burning indignation, and bitterly realised that wealth, though it may procure brilliant accomplishments, may also utterly fail in training a lady.

Being such herself by nature, Mary discreetly took refuge in present silence, and was ever after very cautious in all her intercourse with Miss Braun.

Perhaps that ingenuous person felt that she had overstepped the bounds of decorum in her last speech, but soon consoled herself with the belief that she had fully impressed Miss Norman with the idea that she had made a great mistake in requesting Mrs. Braun, of No. 39, to superintend the cooking at No. 40. If Miss Norman had duly learnt that lesson, then Theodosia felt she had reason to be satisfied with her diplomacy.

Anxious to please the younger sisters, now that she felt she had offended the eldest one, Theodosia joined Estella and Nettie, who were discussing some new cabinet photo-

graphs which Mr. Latimer had presented to the former for her album of celebrities.

"What an interesting-looking woman, and how charmingly that Spanish lace is arranged about her face," said Miss Braun, glancing at a portrait Estella was evidently admiring. "Who is the lady?" she continued.

"Cynthia, the authoress of 'Remembered Ever,'" said Estella, with a look of conscious triumph in her eyes. She felt as if the time was drawing very near when her portrait would be described as "Estella, the authoress of 'Gwendolen.'"

"You take a very great interest in literary people, Estella, don't you?" asked Theodosia, with a simper she meant to be sympathetic.

"I adore talent and genius in whatever guise they appear," answered Estella loftily.

"Are you aware that we have both in the Gardens now?" continued Miss Braun.

"You mean Mr. St. Helier," said Estella promptly.

But no sooner had the name left her lips than she regretted having pronounced it, for she became painfully aware of the malicious scrutiny in Theodosia's cat-like eyes.

"I was not aware that Mr. St. Helier was a *genius*, although I noticed the remarkable interest you took in him," said Miss Braun somewhat spitefully.

Nettie had taken up her position behind Theodosia, at whose ginger-gold chignon she now savagely shook her little fist.

"Is there a new arrival in the Gardens?" asked Estella, eager to dismiss St. Helier from personal discussion.

"No, not new people," said Miss Braun, relieved to find that she had not seriously offended Mr. Norman's second daughter also. "You may have heard," she continued, "that No. 3 down at The Grove end, where the Simpsons were staying, belonged to a family that had spent the winter in Paris. Well, they have just returned. *I* have known them for several years; the gentleman is *very highly connected.*" This was evidently a standard phrase among the Grenfellians. "Indeed, he is the Honble. Lionel Toegoode, younger son of the Earl of Currydone, and his wife—don't be alarmed, Estella—his wife is Adela-ida, the author of 'Can it be?' and 'Gone for Ever!' Now confess that I have told you an interesting piece of news; and, what is more, I can introduce you to Adela-ida whenever you desire to make her acquaintance."

Thus said Miss Braun.

"Oh, I shall be only too delighted; I thank you a thousand times!" cried Estella, visibly warming at the enticing prospect of shaking hands with a popular and successful authoress, whose works she had gloated over for the last three years, though less romantic persons than herself had been heard to stigmatise "Can it be?" and "Gone for Ever!" as high-falutin' rubbish. But then, matter-of-fact people are so uncharitable and so jealous!

The voices of the gentlemen were now audible in the hall, and Theodosia, with a sudden gush of affectionate confidence, threw her arm around Estella's shrinking waist,

and drew the girl into the recess made by the bow of the window. Having Estella by her side, Miss Braun felt she should secure Mr. St. Helier's company also, and to Theodosia the conversation of a man so highly connected, who might even be on speaking terms with real Lords and Dukes, was a sparkling *elixir vitæ*, a refreshing draught to be partaken of whenever opportunity offered.

But, alas! "There's many a slip betwixt the cup and the lip."

The old adage proved true in this instance. Poor Theodosia was doomed to disappointment; for Mr. St. Helier, without even looking at her or Estella, made his way, as with a settled purpose, to where Nettie had taken up her position. She was standing at the farther end of the grand piano, placing the new photographs in her sister's album.

Perhaps the fact of Mr. Latimer's deferential approach, and his taking a chair close to her side, reconciled Theodosia to St. Helier's apparent indifference.

That gentleman was now beyond the range of her watchful eyes and ears, as he bent over the album, and began a *sotto voce* conversation with Nettie, who thoroughly enjoyed this mark of his confidence.

"Tell me about the wonderful old-young lady in the pink satin gown and the golden chignon," was St. Helier's first remark; "I know you and your sister were laughing at her in the dining-room, and now I want you to give me a chance of sharing your amusement. My life is such a very lonely and serious one, that the sunshine of congenial mirth is a most welcome change to me."

"Are you really very lonely?" asked Nettie, with evident sympathy. "I suppose you must be, buried away in The Grove, with only a housekeeper to talk to. But then yours is the loveliest of all those sweet little houses, you know, and there's some consolation in that. If I were you, I should spend all my time in fitting up the inside with the most exquisite pictures, and blue china and iridescent glass, and all those things which, Estella says, 'unconsciously refine the mind through the eyes.' You can't think how clever our Estella is, Mr. St. Helier, and how charmingly she has fitted up what she calls her Den. It is really only a bedroom, you know; but she has had her bed put back in what she calls an alcove, and it is all hidden by rose-coloured curtains. It is perfectly exquisite, I assure you, and so romantic."

"Curtains the colour of Miss Braun's gown, eh? Who is Miss Braun, by-the-bye?" asked St. Helier, aware that he had steered back to his soundings very adroitly.

Then Nettie, warming with her subject, indulged St. Helier with a most elaborate description of Mrs. Braun and the inmates of No. 39.

Nettie dwelt very generously on the fine qualities of the old German lady, and touched on the less amiable characteristics of her aspiring daughter with a marvellous instinct for the ridiculous, which thoroughly overcame the gravity of St. Helier, who listened to the girl's witty mockeries with unrestrained enjoyment.

"But you say she really is accomplished?" he asked, after considering some idea of his own in silence.

"Oh yes; she speaks French and German, and *sings* in Italian!" explained Nettie. "She really plays most wonderfully—Estella says so; and Estella is a great authority on all musical matters."

"Ask your sister to persuade Miss Braun to play us something now, will you?" said St. Helier, whose face and manner during the last few minutes had become grave and preoccupied again.

Estella had left her seat in the window recess, and now stood at the corner of the bow, where she could see both him and Nettie.

Surprised by the expression on St. Helier's face she approached him, and asked if Nettie had displeased him with her nonsensical chatter, and if that was the reason of his very serious looks.

He answered with a bright smile: "I have only praise and admiration to bestow on Miss Nettie; she is a most charming companion, and has entertained me very pleasantly." Then he added:

"Are we not going to have some music now; shall I go and appeal to Miss Norman?"

"*I* can manage that for you," said Estella, and added: "Miss Braun plays wonderfully, shall I ask her?"

"But I am sure you sing," said St. Helier, detaining her, "the only true enjoyment I know is to listen to a sympathetic woman's voice; will you not sing for me?"

His tone thrilled through Estella with an emotion that was almost pain. She would have given up—yes, even her novel, could she have complied with his request, but

alas! she could not sing, and most reluctantly confessed the fact.

His face betrayed his disappointment, but that odd smile of his which had become almost as a beacon to Estella, amid the perplexities of social life, came to his lips and to her rescue now, for she also smiled in return as he said:

"Then play for me, please."

"Gladly," said she, and added, "you shall hear some songs without words."

She took her position at the piano and played without music, giving an interpretation of her own to Mendelssohn's touching instrumental poems. Wholly without affectation, in a simple winsome fashion, Estella by the aid of her supple fingers appealed to her audience; and one who listened to her certainly responded gratefully. "You have sung to me now, and I thank you," said St. Helier, as he offered her his arm to lead her to a chair Theodosia entreated her to occupy.

Moving the chair a little nearer to Mary, Estella seated herself.

Mr. Norman, who had entered the drawing-room with his hand on Mr. Latimer's arm, had now accompanied that gentleman into the window recess, where they were evidently engrossed by a very animated discussion.

"More fleecing?" whispered Nettie wickedly, bending over Mary's ear.

Mary wondered a little at her father's sudden interest in the commercial confidences of Mr. Latimer. That such

was their nature the constantly recurring words of "percentage, interest, capital," convinced her. Thus wondering, Mary sat lost in thought, and was quite startled by Mr. St. Helier, who, having approached her, suddenly said:

"I want to ask you to do me a very great favour, Miss Norman."

This appeal followed immediately on a brilliant display of agility on the part of Miss Braun—which Jonathan described as the "whiz, whirr, crash, and bang of fireworks."

This *pièce de résistance* was in due course followed by the loud applause of the gentlemen.

Then there was a pause, "a lull after the storm," as Nettie whispered to Estella.

It was in this momentary silence that St. Helier addressed himself to Mary. His tone was habitually low, but he spoke slowly and very distinctly, therefore every one in the room heard his appeal.

Estella and Nettie, much interested, drew nearer, and Theodosia looked up into Mr. St. Helier's face as though she would say, "Why not ask a favour of me? I could refuse you nothing."

Mary, not being of the gushing order of women, waited in silence, nor did her looks indicate aught but patience.

Aware that the attention of the company in general was now riveted on him, St. Helier fashioned his request accordingly.

"It is not only of Miss Norman," he said, "that I am about to ask a favour, but of all her guests."

"On Monday next, a musical friend of mine has

promised to come and sing to me. It would be selfish on my part to enjoy that pleasure alone, and I shall be delighted if you all, ladies and gentlemen here present, will honour me with your company on that occasion. If our charming hostess will oblige me by presiding at my tea-table, we shall be able to dignify the little reunion by the title of a kettledrum."

"I am sure I for one shall be most delighted," said Miss Braun, rising and attempting a curtsy, which she had heard or read was considered distinctive of high breeding, and a custom much practised among the upper ten.

"I think, Mr. St. Helier," she said, approaching him, "that I shall venture to make a request in Estella's name as well as my own. Will you permit me to invite my dear friend the Honourable Mrs. Toegoode, otherwise Adela-ida, to accompany us on Monday?"

"Most happy, I am sure," said St. Helier politely, and seeing a smile of evident satisfaction lighting up Estella's face, he promptly added:

"Proud to see any friend of yours, Miss Braun."

To that lady his impulsive reiteration was conclusive. She *had* impressed this highly-connected stranger by the mention of *her* highly-connected friend; "like will to like," as she afterwards explained to Estella.

"Then I may hope to see you all on Monday next, at five?" said St. Helier, and having received a general affirmative, thought it was time to say good-night.

Ten minutes later, the lights in the drawing-room of No. 40 were extinguished; but long after midnight a solitary

candle was flickering in a certain Den on the third-floor, and there Estella sat alternately perusing her notes which lay on the table before her, and her face which looked at her with its darkly shining eyes from out of the oval dressing-glass. She brushed away that dark touzly fringe which hid her forehead, and vaguely wondered if *he* would like her better without it? She had heard some men inveigh against *fringes* with vehemence. She wished she knew if *he* did?

Estella had really thought very little about her personal appearance hitherto, but during this last week her dress and her face had assumed quite an important part in her life, and she often caught herself wondering, does *he* think me pretty? does *he* think me nice?

He did think both, but he took good care not to let her guess that was so.

CHAPTER V.

FIVE-O'CLOCK TEA WITH AN ÆSTHETIC.

RETURNING from evening service on the following Sunday, the Norman girls crossed the Gardens, in order to take a short cut to No. 40. On their way they met St. Helier, who was evidently returning to the Grove. He was accompanied by an elderly man, whose hand rested on his companion's arm.

The girls bowed and passed on.

Estella flushed as—to her horror—she was apt to do on any sudden emotion. She realised and rebelled at the iron grip of conventionality which held her fast, and compelled her to walk tranquilly on, when she so longed to stand and speak, and to be spoken to, by him.

Jonathan, who was probably on the look-out for the girls at the windows of No. 39, stepped airily forth from that mansion as the Misses Norman approached their home.

"What is the news?" he asked, coming to join them as they stood waiting at the small gate which separated their bit of private garden from the social recreation-ground.

"What is the news?" he repeated, quailing a little under Nettie's keenly inquiring glance.

"How dare you ask such a question of us?" she replied saucily. "We expect to hear every atom of news from you. And let me warn you, Master Johnny Pry," she added, laughing, "that we consider your information has by no means been up to our mark lately. How was it you never told us a word about this charming Mr. St. Helier? He has been living within a stone's throw of the Gardens for ever so long, and yet comes upon us now like a perfect stranger."

"Well, he is the son of——," began Johnny apologetically; but Nettie interrupted him with uplifted hands.

"My dear boy," said she, "we don't want to know anything about his grandfathers, and a whole lot of troublesome old fogies like that. We want you to explain how it is you have never shown him to us before, nor even mentioned

his existence. We want to know what his house is like, and his housekeeper too, and who are his friends in the Gardens and the Grove. Reticence is not much in your line, is it now? Can you be humble and honest for once, and meekly confess that you didn't know anything at all about him?"

"If you are going through a scene from the Inquisition, Nettie," said Mary laughing, "we may as well proceed indoors."

"No, Polly dear," cried Nettie, "let Stella and Johnny and me stay out a bit longer, please. It's so lovely to be walking about in the Gardens at this time. I know you want to be mixing your salad-dressing for supper, but you don't require an audience for that. Johnny, who means to hold forth and make up for lost time, does want listeners, so let us stay."

"Yes, Mary, we'll soon follow you, and give you a *résumé* of all the gossip we hear," said Estella, who, to the astonishment of both her sisters, appeared quite eager to hear all Johnny had to say on this occasion, although she was inclined to snub him at all other times.

"I must go in and see to the supper, of course," said Mary. "Father told me he would be in by half-past nine. If you do stop out, be sure you don't sit down, girls, for a heavy dew is falling already."

"All right, Granny dear," said saucy Nettie, suddenly embracing her sister, who, much embarrassed by this "public demonstration," hurriedly escaped from "that heedless baby."

"And now, Master Johnny, for a full and free confession," Nettie resumed, returning to the attack. "Why have you never told us anything about Mr. St. Helier?"

"The fact is, I really had forgotten all about him, Nettie," remarked Jonathan deprecatingly. "I used to see him last winter now and then, but never spoke to him until your father introduced me the other evening. I know he is rich."

"No, you don't!" cried Nettie. "He may be some day, but now he practises as a barrister, because, though poor, he is a very superior young man, and doesn't, and won't, be idle. He is too proud, and, to quote your own pet saying, 'and all that sort of thing.'"

"Very lucidly put, Miss Nettie," cried Johnny, quite ready to join in the laugh against himself. "Well, any way, Mr. St. Helier belongs to an awfully grand family," continued Curtis. "He snubs all the people about here, and the only man who has ever been inside his house is that snuffy old Italian, Signor Scuro, who gives singing lessons, and accompanies at concerts, and 'all that sort of thing.' He lodges with the Millers at the end of the Grove. And he was just walking home with St. Helier now."

"We saw them," said Estella, who had been listening in silence hitherto.

"Well, this Scuro says," continued Jonathan, much gratified by Estella's evident attention, "that St. Helier's place is a perfect 'tesoro,' which means something very choice, no doubt."

"St. Helier went away to Rome in January, and has not

long been back. I shall be awfully pleased to go to this kettledrum to-morrow, and feel I have to thank you for the invitation, for he never took the slightest notice of me before."

"Pray don't thank us, my dear Johnny," said Nettie, solemnly. "Once the power of your fascinations is realised, it must insure your being a welcome guest anywhere."

"You're chaffing, Nettie, you always are," said poor Jonathan, moving nervously from one large foot to the other.

"You'll wear your boots out if you dance about like that, Johnny," remonstrated Nettie, on which her adorer desisted and apologised quite humbly.

"Mr. Latimer is quite as pleased to have been invited to the tea-party as I am," Jonathan continued, addressing himself to Estella, "but as for Miss Theodosia, I can't make out whether she is most pleased or vexed. She complains that Mr. St. Helier showed you more attention than he did to her, and that Miss Norman is trying to separate her from Mr. Latimer, and 'all that sort of thing, you know:' and, oh! what queer things women are!" added Johnny by way of peroration.

"From your point of view, I should think they must be, Johnny Pry," laughed Nettie.

"I believe Miss Braun is horrified at our accepting a bachelor's invitation at all," remarked Estella, to whom Theodosia had confessed such disapproval.

"She said she would have been scandalised," explained Jonathan, "had not Mr. St. Helier first turned to her. She

then contrived to put the matter on a proper footing at once, by volunteering to introduce the Honble. Mrs. Toegoode as a guarantee for the general propriety of the tea-party."

"Oh! that is really delicious," cried Nettie. "Poor modest naïve little Dosie, what a pity she should have so agitated herself."

"You never told us about Mrs. Toegoode either," said Estella to Jonathan in a regretful tone.

"Master Curtis," interposed Nettie severely, "I shall certainly have to depose you from the post of honorary informant to the ladies Norman, and, as Estella would put it, turn elsewhither for the retailing of gossip."

"I should recognise that as a quotation, Nettie," said Jonathan meekly. "Miss Estella and Mr. Latimer are the only people I know who can put their ideas into such beautiful language."

"I'll back Estella to shut Mr. Latimer up in a twinkling, any day," cried Nettie, to whom a little slang was as salt to the insipidity of ordinary conversation.

Jonathan, alarmed at the thought that he had unwittingly depreciated Nettie's talents, hastened to reassure her.

"To tell you the truth, Nettie, I like your style of expressing yourself far better than all the fine words which other people use."

As he spoke he looked at the girl with all the admiration his gooseberry eyes were capable of expressing. "You say what you mean," he added, "there's no beating about the bush with you."

"And you talk about things you don't understand in the least, Master Johnny. Now, come, redeem your character by giving us a little information about the Honble. Mrs. Toegoode, and then we will go in. Oh! don't stand staring at Estella, you've not been at all entertaining, and so she has taken refuge in the clouds this last half-hour."

"I promise to return to earth at once," said Estella, smiling, "if Jonathan can give me any information about Adela-ida."

"I didn't know she was Adela-ida," said Jonathan, opening his mouth widely, and liberally adding vowels to the name to give it more importance still. "But I do know something about her husband," he added. "Remember, what I tell you on this point is strictly in confidence, and all that sort of thing."

"We promise to be silent as the tomb," said Nettie, in a sepulchral whisper.

"Well," resumed Jonathan, thoroughly in his element now he was able to discourse interesting scandal. "It appears the Honble. Lionel Toegoode might more fitly be called 'The Dishonourable Cur Nogood.'"

"Shocking! But oh! how deliciously interesting," remarked Nettie. "Go on, Johnny Pry—good boy." Thus encouraged Jonathan continued:

"Someone told me he lived on his wife's money. I suppose that means on what she can make out of her novel-yielding brains. He took No. 3 in the Gardens beginning of last year, and despite his wife's money or brains, had to 'cut and run' from his creditors eleven months after.

"Thanks to some ready money and the family interest, however, the creditors didn't sell him up, they gave him time, and leave to let the house furnished. His wife managed to arrange that for him, and took him away to Paris, where she desired to study life from a French aspect. He went with her to recruit——"

"His health or his finances?" asked Estella.

"Both, I should think," said Jonathan.

"And so poor Adela-ida uses her woman's wit to support such a useless husband as that?" said Estella, with intense compassion in her look and voice.

"Women are queer sorts of things, as I remarked before," suggested Jonathan.

"And pray, how do you describe *men?*" cried Estella, with a tragic tone and air.

"I call you a great gander, as you know," laughed Nettie, "and wish you a very good-night, Master Johnny."

"Come, Stella!" she added, calling to her sister as they both turned homewards.

Jonathan, surprised at this sudden leave-taking, stood in motionless amazement in the centre of the gravel path.

He was quite startled when Estella, who had returned alone, touched his arm and said: "You know this Signor Scuro, Jonathan, can *he* be the musical friend to whom Mr. St. Helier intends to introduce us to-morrow?"

"Oh dear no!" said Johnny, a little surprised by the earnest manner of this unexpected questioner.

"He said someone was going to sing to us, didn't he? Old Scuro composes and accompanies; that's all he can

do, but he gives lessons to some of the swell tenors; perhaps he'll bring one of them to entertain us."

"Tenors?" repeated Estella, who had recovered her usual ease of manner. "Oh! then he does not teach ladies?"

"That's more than I can tell you," said Jonathan, "but I'll be sure and ascertain for you. I think I can understand your mysterious anxiety now, Miss Estella," he added, whispering, "you are thinking of taking lessons yourself in secret, aren't you now?—you may trust me, I won't say a word."

"Poor Johnny! don't trouble yourself to assert impossibilities," she answered, laughing. "As yet I have not thought of taking lessons," she added, "and in any case I can find out all about Signor Scuro myself to-morrow. I will inquire of Mr. St. Helier. He will tell me all his old friend can undertake. Now, Jonathan, good-night—unless you will come in and take some supper with us? We sup on Sundays—always, you know."

This was a great temptation to Curtis, but he had promised Mr. Latimer that he would be at home all the evening, and not even the prospect of spending it at No. 40 would have reconciled this faithful young man to the chance of disappointing the much-admired Peregrine.

"Father, try to be back a little before five this afternoon," said Estella, as she bade Mr. Norman good-bye after breakfast next morning.

"Oh! it's St. Helier's tea-party, isn't it?" asked Mr. Norman, laughing.

"Yes, and we ought to be there early, because our Polly is to make the tea," urged Nettie.

"Jonathan will take good care I am punctual," said Mr. Norman. "We shall return from the city together, as I have a board-meeting on to-day."

Mr. Norman returned home in very good time, and Jonathan, who had had his auburn locks curled and liberally anointed with macassar, had decorated his button-hole with a red red rose. He was evidently much elated by the prospect of this anteprandial dissipation.

"Where is Estella?" asked Mr. Norman, as he joined Mary and Nettie who were waiting in the hall.

"Stella is so overcome by the prospect of having tea with an author and looking at an authoress, that she can't find a dress worthy of the occasion," Nettie said, laughing, and added: "She experimented with her black silk, and then her brown stripe, and finally tried her pale blue; while I was upstairs with her——"

"And here she comes all in white," said Mr. Norman, watching Estella as she descended the stairs. "You three young people go on," he added, "Mary and I will follow soberly; we like to see mischief before us." As he spoke, he looked from one to the other of his daughters with pardonable pride. They were decidedly pretty girls, bright, happy, and healthy-looking. Each one had some special distinction about her, and all three did credit to their father's careful training.

"I have been thinking a great deal about Mr. St. Helier's house," said Nettie, as the party entered the Gardens at the back of No. 40, intending to cross to the Grove exit.

"From what he hinted to me, and you confirmed yesterday, Johnny, I expect to find it a perfect haven."

"A haven?" echoed Estella, wondering.

"No, no; that is not what I meant to say, nor yet a paradise, but something the betterest of the best sort of thing, don't you know, Johnny?"

"Indeed I don't," said Johnny, utterly at a loss.

"Mary!" cried Nettie impatiently, turning back towards her eldest sister who was following at a little distance, "what do they put on the best pins and needles and cutlery?"

"*Ne plus ultra*," suggested Mary, wondering.

"Or *multum in parvo?*" inquired Jonathan, making an effort.

"Yes, that's what I mean, either will do," cried Nettie, delighted. "I'll tell you which is best when we get there."

"Will you be pleased to explain what you really do mean? that is, if you know yourself," remarked Estella, with some asperity.

"Don't be cross, Stella darling," pleaded Nettie; "I only mean that I can imagine Mr. St. Helier's to be the *ne plus ultra* of prettiness and refinement, and the other seven virtues; don't you really think so too?"

"You are quite too absurd, Baby," said Estella, who could not suppress a smile, though she tried hard to look severe.

"You don't disapprove of my *ne plus ultra*, all the same; in fact, you think it a first-rate notion," cried Nettie, laughing heartily at her sister's perplexed look.

"We shall see what we shall see," remarked Estella oracularly.

Jonathan was in such a hurry to make his next speech that he almost interrupted hers.

"I beg your pardon," he said hurriedly, and continued: "I got a whole heap of news for you last night, Nettie."

"Good boy," said she. "Now I will accept your arm; but tell it all, and quickly, please."

"Miss Theodosia was in a very good temper last night," said he, "and she and Mr. Latimer talked people over, and I heard a great deal more about Mr. and Mrs. Toegoode; and, what is better still, I found out that Mr. Latimer knows the countess dowager who lives at No. 1, and that he has called upon her twice, and that he has been invited to her next At-Home on the 16th proximo.

"Of course Miss Dosie is quite in a flutter because she doesn't see her way to getting a card of invitation; but she is determined to go, and means to settle it with Mrs. Toegoode to-day, as that lady is a special *protégée* of the dowager's."

"This is news indeed," said Nettie delighted; "and now, Estella, we must put our three heads together and see how we can get some of these precious cards too—eh?"

"I suppose Mr. St. Helier is acquainted with the countess also?" inquired Estella.

"Most likely," answered Jonathan, who had imbibed some of Miss Braun's notions on the manners and customs of the aristocracy. "The swells all hang together, and that sort of thing, don't you know?"

"I know nothing at all about swells," said Estella drily. She was not in her usual spirits.

"What a sweetly pretty road this really is," remarked Nettie, as they entered little Grenfell Grove, "and what a nice idea to plant trees on either side. I like these delicious little houses ten thousand times better than our great Gardens," she added, waiting for her father and Mary to come up with them.

"How different this road looks now the trees are all out," said Mr. Norman. "I have not been here these last three months."

"I call it simply delicious," cried Nettie, who felt quite at a loss for adjectives appropriate to her admiration.

"As for these lovely little dolls' houses," she continued, "with the creepers all over them, and the ornamental porches, and the neat gardens with their tiny gravel paths, and the dainty flower-beds—oh! father, do let us give up No. 40, and come and live in this *multum in parvo* of beauty."

"Why, Baby, who has been coaching you up, my dear?" asked Mr. Norman laughing, and added: "I knew of Estella's varied accomplishments, but never knew she had a rival in my little one."

"This is the house I suppose?" inquired Mary, as she stopped before the prettiest, neatest, and most orderly of all the dwarf mansions.

"I told you Mr. St. Helier's would be the *ne plus ultra*," exclaimed Nettie, and her delighted father said:

"I did not hear the prophecy, but must congratulate the clever little prophetess, bless her!"

Estella appeared to take little interest in the outward aspect of the house about which she had secretly thought so

intently, and which she was now half-anxious, half-dreading, to enter.

She made no verbal comment, but she attentively noted every detail on which her eager admiring glance rested, and could have filled a volume of her notes with fresh "descriptive bits" before she even reached the drawing-room, which, as in the Gardens, was situated at the back of the ground-floor. But all the time these mental notes were storing themselves in Estella's memory, a much more vivid question was agitating her mind, a question which had tormented her ever since Thursday, and to which she with growing impatience expected to receive an answer to-day.

Who was Mr. St. Helier's musical friend; the friend whose singing was so delightful to listen to?

Signor Scuro's pupils, according to Jonathan, were tenors. Was it a tenor they had been invited to hear to-day? or did Signor Scuro teach ladies also, and was this musical friend of whose sex Mr. St. Helier had left them all ignorant a *prima-donna*?

No sooner had the girls entered the drawing-room than Estella's heart began to throb fast and anxiously, for she at once perceived a strange lady seated by Miss Braun's side.

The lady who rose at this moment was tall and slim. She had a profusion of auburn hair, arranged, or rather disarranged, in a most eccentric fashion. The style and colour of her dress were as startling and peculiar as were those of her hair.

"Allow me to introduce you to the Honourable Mrs. Lionel Toegoode, my dear Estella," said Miss Braun, lead-

ing Estella, who was now beaming with smiles and satisfaction, to Adela-ida.

The position of Mrs. Toegoode's particular friend filled Miss Braun with so much importance that she utterly ignored Mary and Nettie for the time being.

The girls, however, were not much taken aback by this neglect, for Mr. St. Helier at once proved himself a good host and a man of resource, by engaging Mary, Nettie, their father, and Mr. Curtis in an animated conversation, of which certain words fell upon Estella's keenly-expectant ear. She distinctly heard the names, "Mrs. Vivian" and "Ronald." Was Ronald the tenor? she wondered. Adela-ida, meanwhile addressing herself pointedly to Estella, launched into panegyrics on her dear kind friend the Countess Dowager of Dewminster.

"She gives such charming at-homes," said Adela-ida confidentially; "and she likes me to bring as many of my friends as I choose to ask to her *réunions*. Sometimes I take six or eight people. We meet at my house and then adjourn to No. 1. It's a most charming arrangement for me, you see, for it saves me from the trouble and responsibility of giving parties at home, which, in any case, I could not undertake. Poor dear Lionel does not like our place turned topsy-turvy, and we haven't the servants to do it, you see. I'll take *you* to No. 1 when there is an at-home again, most likely on the 16th of next month; but don't say a word about it, my dear."

Estella looked surprised.

"You mustn't let our dear Dosie know," explained

Mrs. Toegoode in a sepulchral tone, very like a stage whisper; "I dare not take her for the world. The dear Dow—my pet name for the countess—objects to see any but pretty or stylish people about her. She will not receive plain or ill-dressed guests, unless they have made a name for themselves: authors, or singers, or poets, or artists, and she doesn't even draw the line at actors if they are comic and will sing or recite. I often remonstrate with her on that head, but she has a strong will of her own, and says to me: 'My dear Addie'—Addie is my pet name, of course—'My dear Addie, they tell me life is short, and so I am determined to make the best of it. I like to see pretty people, and hear pretty tales, and so——'"

What further views of life the countess held, Estella did not learn, for at this moment Mrs. and Mr. Ronald Vivian were announced.

"I call her the 'Shoddy-Princess,' my dear," Mrs. Toegoode whispered to Estella. "St. Helier met her in Rome and promised to get a house in the Gardens for her, and she has just taken No. 30. We met her in Paris, and she was delighted to think we should be neighbours. She is thoroughly American, rich and very pushing, quite struggles to work her way upwards, you see. Well, I thought I would give her a lift, and so I promised to take her to the dear Dow's next at-home. She was delighted. She quite worships our aristocracy. She took me to the new opera twice—in Paris that was—and begged me to help her make up some parties here, and——"

"That is surely not her husband?" inquired Estella,

attracted by the handsome face of young Mr. Ronald, in whom, with palpable relief, she felt sure she beheld Mr. St. Helier's musical friend.

"Oh no! not her husband—her son, my dear," Mrs. Toegoode replied. "A very handsome fellow, don't you think? and so clever."

Estella had almost spoken the all-important words, "Does he sing?"

But Mrs. Toegoode had a question to ask which was more important to her than answering anyone else's inquiries.

"You live in the Gardens, my dear?" she said. "We must be friends; I like you greatly. I shall come and call upon you, and we'll go and see the Shoddy-Princess together, and make her give a house-warming for us, and I will bring all the nicest people I know for you to see. There is Lord Shorne; he writes, you know—clever, but very quiet, and oh, *such* a dear! And the Baroness de Pau—she is a rich Jewess, and——"

"Ladies, I fear that I must trouble you to move, while Mrs. O'Neill arranges the tea-table," said Mr. St. Helier, who had approached and introduced the latest arrivals to his other guests.

"Shall we lead the way into the music-room?" he added, offering his arm to Mrs. Toegoode.

The drawing-room was furnished luxuriously, and in the best taste. The art-treasures on walls, pedestals, shelves, and brackets, mutely testified to the perseverance and research of their collector. Estella saw and noted all these

evidences of culture, and longed to be able to speak to St. Helier and congratulate him on the possession of such wondrous treasures. But he was too attentive a host to single out any individual guest for prolonged conversation, and Estella understood and admired him the more.

The reception-room in which the guests had first assembled was separated from the front, or music-room, by velvet *portières* which were now looped back, thus giving additional space to each apartment.

One of these was richly carpeted, and almost crowded with handsome furniture; in the other the floor was parquet, and only a rug lay upon it. The chairs were of cane, the curtains of lace, and neither cushions nor tablecovers were suffered to impair the musical sounds for the thorough enjoyment of which the room was intended. All this Estella noted also.

Mr. St. Helier said his greatest delight was to listen to good singing, she pondered; here he has proved his predilection—but who sings to him? Are we to hear the favoured one to-day?

Mary had now taken up her position at the head of the tea-table in the back room, and Mr. Latimer was in officious attendance at her right hand.

"Will you pardon what may sound like want of gallantry, Miss Norman?" said Mr. Latimer, after offering to assist that lady in her arduous duties. "I cannot resist this opportunity of giving you some good advice," he added, "for I am fond of tea, and I never yet met a lady who understood how to make it properly."

Mary glanced at him with mute inquiry in her surprised eyes.

"As I feel convinced that you are both clever and teachable, Miss Norman," continued Latimer, "I should like to give you a useful practical lesson at once. May I?"

"I should be very much obliged, of course," said Mary, who could not help wishing that Mr. Latimer had selected some less trying occasion for his experiments.

Mr. Latimer, thoroughly self-satisfied as usual, was of course unconscious of any such desire on the timid tea-maker's part, and at once proceeded to instil his views on infusion into her calmly receptive mind.

"Now I can promise you that your second cup will be quite as good as the first, Mrs. Vivian," said Latimer, bowing to the black-eyed American, whose handsome dress and imposing manner had found favour in his appreciative eyes. Indeed, they had of late been somewhat sparsely fed by the unvaried contemplation of Theodosia's meagre proportions, and her English adaptation of that French style of dress which Mrs. Vivian emulated with transatlantic success.

Nettie, who was seated by Mr. Ronald Vivian's side, seemed thoroughly satisfied with her companion.

Ronald was young, endowed with an unusually handsome face, and a frankly ingenuous manner. To simple Miss Nettie he appeared to be the embodiment of such perfection as she would have styled heroic, had she, like Estella, been able to take notes, and to transcribe her impressions and imaginings. She listened eagerly and

attentively to all this charming young man chose to tell her, resolving to repeat their interesting conversation verbatim to Estella, and to induce that authoress to make use of the "situation" in the novel to which Estella was daily adding new and wondrous experiences now.

By the time the lesson in tea-making and its strong results had been sufficiently appreciated, Estella felt decidedly more at her ease. Confirmation only was needed to her conviction that Mr. Vivian was musical and sang. But he was seated at a distance from her, and Nettie engrossed his attention completely. So Estella felt she must reserve her question until they entered the music-room.

Then he would sing, of course, and she would be satisfied.

"Shall we adjourn?" said Mr. St. Helier as the ladies rose from the tea-table.

It seemed to Estella as though she led a dual existence whenever she was in St. Helier's presence now, for she managed to watch and listen to him, however far away she found herself, and yet she contrived to assent or dissent in conventional monosyllables to the small talk addressed to her by those who were seeking to entertain or to be entertained by her.

To-day he appeared to be preoccupied by some greater anxiety than the entertainment of his guests, and Estella saw him repeatedly glancing towards the door with an expectant look in his eyes, which changed to disappointment when the housekeeper or the valet entered without making any fresh announcement.

The host was evidently still expecting someone. Who could it be? wondered Estella, and thought the reply came as John, the valet, ushered in "Signor Scuro."

The snuffy, wrinkled little Italian now hobbled into the room. He extended both hands in answer to the cordial greeting of his host, and his small glittering black eyes twinkled and blinked as he surveyed all the persons assembled.

"But the signorina—where is she?" he asked anxiously.

Estella saw that perplexed look deepening on St. Helier's face as he held a whispered consultation with the signor.

"Who is the signorina?" wondered Estella, her latent anxieties all aroused again.

Meanwhile St. Helier, perhaps in consequence of his conversation with Signor Scuro, begged Miss Braun to favour them all with one of her marvellous bravura pieces.

Theodosia, who never went out without a well-stocked music-roll, immediately prepared herself for the execution of that modern test of muscle known as Thalberg's "Home, sweet Home." But the melody awoke no longing, suggested no repose, for this "sweet home" was hidden in a mist of noisy variations which smothered the original air, and left a sense of confusion and bewilderment in the minds of the stunned listeners.

Estella, feeling and fearing for the beautiful instrument on which such doughty deeds were being enacted, retired to the farther corner of the music-room, where a few books lay on a marble slab. Estella, who had noticed the well-filled shelves in the library she passed on first entering the house,

at once concluded that these volumes had been specially selected for Mr. St. Helier's perusal. Eager to learn the titles of the books he liked best, she bent down to peruse them, and in so doing noticed a miniature in a velvet case, which rested on a tiny gilt easel behind the books. It was the portrait of a woman, with a broad brow and large dark eyes, which met Estella's eagerly inquiring glance. Without a moment's reflection Estella took the miniature into her hand to examine it more closely.

"Who is that?" whispered Nettie suddenly, putting her hand on her sister's arm and glancing curiously at the portrait too.

Estella had started guiltily, and felt inclined to replace the portrait upon its gilt stand instantly; but Nettie took it into her own hands now, and repeated:

"Who can she be? She looks like one of the celebrities out of your album, Stella."

"*I* wonder who she can be?" echoed Estella, in an odd broken tone, and felt a sudden ache and throbbing in her heart and in her temples as the door opened and a lady entered, a lady with the dark eyes and the broad brow of the miniature.

"La Signorina Hilda Santarelli," said St. Helier, leading her into the room and introducing her to the assembled guests.

Then, placing the lady's hand on his arm, he took her over to where Estella and Nettie stood. Turning pointedly to the former, he said: "I hope you and the signorina will be good friends, for she is the musical lady I told you of."

CHAPTER VI.

ST. HELIER'S MUSICAL FRIEND.

RONALD VIVIAN was standing beside Nettie, when the signorina entered the room, and the baby, who was observant beyond her years, noticed with surprise that the young man started visibly, and that every trace of colour faded from his face, leaving it pale almost to ghastliness.

With a sudden impulse of compassion Nettie bent towards him and whispered:

"Do you feel faint? You look pale. Shall I get you a glass of water? No one shall know it is for you. Pray sit down; I am sure you are ill!" she added very anxiously.

"No, no, thanks; don't trouble, pray; it is nothing, I assure you," he answered, striving to control the trembling of his voice.

After a moment's pause he endeavoured to explain:

"It was such a very sudden surprise," he said; "I knew the signorina was coming to London, but I had no idea she had arrived already."

"Oh! then you were acquainted before?" asked Nettie, striving to appear indifferent, but far too inexperienced as yet to succeed in a *rôle* so foreign to her ingenuous nature.

"Yes, I knew the signorina very well in Rome," said Ronald; "but when we parted she had—quarrelled with me."

"Oh!" said Nettie, making a tremendous effort to suppress the questions she so keenly desired to ask now.

Before the signorina had time to seat herself by Estella's side, Mrs. Vivian had approached. She took both the stranger's hands in hers, and saluted her on either cheek. Hilda submitted, but did not in the least respond to these demonstrations. Estella looked on and wondered. Perhaps there was some sign of this surprise on her face, for, as Hilda took the chair by her side, she said, as though in explanation:

"Mrs. Vivian and I were acquainted in Rome. There our views on a certain question differed entirely, and we were not very good friends; but all that is of the past—buried. Ah! here is Mr. Ronald," she added, extending her hand, and cordially replying to the young man's greeting.

"I am fortunate to find myself among friends instantly I arrive," said Hilda. "Indeed, I almost feel as if *you* were among the number already," she added, meeting Estella's questioning eyes with a touching appeal in her own.

Estella at this moment thought Hilda looked beautiful; the wistful expression in those clear brown eyes captivated her, and Estella, as the reader knows, was always impressionable. She now responded to the stranger's glance with a pleasant smile, which the signorina found *molto simpatica.*

Ronald had returned to Nettie's side, and was soon again absorbed in an interesting conversation with that young lady. Estella, meanwhile, was yielding herself to the genial influence of the stranger who sat by her side, and looked at and spoke to her with irresistible frankness.

"I am lost in wonder at your perfect English, signorina," she said. "Is it possible that you are really Italian?"

"I was born in Rome, and my dear father is a Roman," said Hilda, evidently proud of these facts. Then, with a certain tenderness, she added: "But I love England; I rejoice to find myself here at last, for my poor dear mother was an Englishwoman. She taught me to love and admire her native country; we always spoke her language together——she has not long been dead."

Estella's hand crept shyly into Hilda's and rested there. There was silence between them for some moments, then Estella inquired:

"Have you only just left Rome?"

"Rather more than a week ago," said the signorina with a little sigh, which sounded more impatient than regretful. "I am quite thankful to know that all the heartrending adieux are at an end, and that I am free at last to devote myself to an entirely new life now that I am arrived in a country I have so long desired to see."

"And yet, I fear, our gloomy London will prove somewhat dispiriting to you after the life and brightness of your splendid Rome," said Estella. She looked wonderingly into Hilda's face as she spoke, and in her secret soul an anxious question arose: "Is it for *his* sake that you have abandoned your native land and come here?"

Hilda seemed to divine the drift of Estella's silent perplexity, and said:

"You wonder what really induced me to come to London, don't you? It was not merely curiosity, though, for the reasons I explained to you just now, that feeling was a strong one. But I have no leisure for the indulgence

of such idle fancies. I came to London with a purpose. I mean to complete my musical studies here."

"I should have thought the sunny melodious south far better adapted to such a pursuit than our dismal inharmonious London," remarked Mr. Latimer, who had approached the girls and heard the signorina's last speech.

"It is not a question of preference with me, sir," said Hilda; "I was compelled to come and reside here, because the *mæstro* who has taught me hitherto has settled in London for the remains of this season."

Hilda's occasional un-English application of certain words lent a piquancy to her talk, but never jarred upon the listener, since her pronunciation was faultless. She now turned to Estella and continued:

"I hear that talent from all the countries finds encouragement and occupation here. This is for me of the greatest importance. Singing is not a mere pastime for me; it is a very serious task to which I intend to devote myself entirely."

"To singing?" asked Nettie, who had heard the signorina's last speech, which was delivered with some emphasis.

"You mean to devote yourself entirely to singing?" repeated Nettie, with a look of naïve wonder upon her baby face.

"Yes," replied Hilda, with a sudden earnestness of manner which impressed both the girls. "Yes, the good God has given me a voice, and it is surely my duty to cultivate it, and to make it pleasing to others and useful to

myself. I hope some day to make my *début* in London," Hilda continued very seriously; "but oh! there is so much to be learnt first."

"Do you mean that you intend to sing in public?" asked Estella rather shocked, as Mr. Norman, who had something of the British Philistine about him, was apt to look upon the amusements furnished at parties and elsewhere as part of the entertainment bought and paid for by the quart, like the ices.

Estella, remembering her father's views, at which she silently rebelled, was now quite startled at finding herself in such close proximity to one who avowed herself anxious to embrace a public career.

"Such is my hope and my ambition," said Hilda, quite unconscious of the impression her words were making on the circle of listeners that had gathered around her while she was speaking. Ronald and Jonathan were among this number.

Mr. St. Helier now approached, and the little group dispersed. He asked the signorina if she would kindly consent to delight them all with a song, and as she rose to acquiesce, he begged Signor Scuro to accompany the lady.

"What shall it be?" asked Hilda, meeting St. Helier's eyes with a sudden glad light in hers, which Estella knew *he* must think beautiful, since she herself felt it to be so.

"My old favourite, if you please," he said, and led her to the piano.

Ronald had also watched this little scene, had noted

the glad look in Hilda's face, and the admiration in St. Helier's.

Nettie, keenly alive to-day to all that was passing around her, on her part had noticed how powerfully that strange woman's looks and words affected Ronald, and she became aware of a sudden feeling of hatred towards Hilda, a lurking bitterness hitherto unknown to her guileless nature.

At the same time her heart was filled with a growing compassion for handsome Ronald, who followed Hilda constantly with his wistful eyes, and whose face now wore an earnest pained expression which seemed terrible to Nettie.

She had watched him as he first approached Hilda, and she had heard him ask her in a nervous whisper:

"Are you as pitiless as ever?"

Estella would have seized upon this romantic question as an appropriate heading for one of the most sensational chapters in her novel, but to Nettie it only conveyed an acute sense of real human suffering, and filled her childish heart with a sense of compassion she was utterly incapable of analysing.

* * * * *

Hilda stood at some little distance from the piano, and without arranging herself, or coughing, or hoisting her shoulders, or indulging in any other of the foolish affectations by which singers seek to make, but always mar, effect, she at once began the glorious scena from "Robert," "*Va, dit-Elle.*"

* * * * *

Perfect silence, which is the sure test of the interest of an audience, lasted until the last brilliant cadenza, which

culminated in the phrase "*sa mère qui priera pour lui.*" Then followed such plaudits as must have startled all the lesser Grenfellians who dwelt in the Grove.

Not only the gentlemen manifested their delight by rapturous applause, but Mrs. Toegoode, Mary, Theodosia, and Nettie all joined in with clapping hands and glad acclamations. Estella alone was silent. With tearful eyes, pale and mute, she sat waiting. She had never before heard so glorious a voice, so pure a delivery. She was only a country girl, remember, reader; operatic performances were as yet "unknown quantities" to her; but she had studied music, and could judge and appreciate it. She stood apart, while the rest of the party crowded around Hilda, questioning and congratulating her. A brilliant idea had suggested itself to Mrs. Toegoode. If she applied at once, no doubt she could secure Hilda's attendance at one of the dowager's *soirées*. If Adela-ida could obtain this as a personal favour, and without a check being expected by the singer, the countess would be very grateful to Mrs. Toegoode for acting so promptly and economically. Animated by this enterprising spirit, Adela-ida overwhelmed the signorina with fulsome praise and compliments, and even hinted at the prospect of her speedy introduction to the Countess of Dewminster, a piece of news which seemed to interest Hilda far less than the contemplation of Estella's face, who now stood by her side. Their eyes met. Silent still, Estella took Hilda's hand in both her own, and (as Mrs. Toegoode turned towards Mrs. Vivian) the girl pressed her lips upon it in a touching spirit of reverence.

"I thank you with all my heart," she said simply, and as she spoke she realised that this was an hour of self-abnegation for her. Henceforth she could never again delude herself with the idea that Mr. St. Helier cared for her, how could he ever have done so, knowing and evidently admiring this grand woman, with her magnificent voice? It never occurred to Estella that her own charm of face and manner might have made her a dangerous rival, even to the attractive Hilda, who certainly sang divinely. In simple reverence Estella acknowledged the power of this gifted Italian, and humbly prepared herself to retire into the shade of the commonplace, which she now concluded was her fitting sphere.

Hilda appreciated, and was gratified by Estella's evident delight, and now drew her on one side, intending to have some further conversation with her. But Mrs. Toegoode at once put her veto on such confidences; she had not yet secured this precious nightingale, and was determined to lose no opportunity of enlisting her in the great At-Home cause.

Mr. Latimer was evidently much struck by Mrs. Vivian, and quite aware that that lady and he had a similar ambition, which consisted in the most rapid ascent of the social ladder of London society.

Acting upon this cue, he volunteered to induce the Countess of Dewminister to call upon Mrs. Vivian, and personally invite that lady to the next At-Home on the 16th proximo.

Mr. Latimer was rewarded for this promise by a most

demonstrative ebullition of gratitude on the part of the Shoddy-Princess, whose illusions concerning, and veneration for, the British aristocracy were of a thoroughly transatlantic character.

Mary and Jonathan were eagerly discussing the various Grenfellians whom they had met to-day, and St. Helier had just retired into the adjoining drawing-room with Theodosia, on the pretext of showing her some wonderful etchings. He really desired to have some private conversation with her.

Miss Braun, instantly aware of some covered intention on her host's part, became somewhat agitated in her manner. She rapidly reviewed their previous intercourse, and swiftly rushed to one conclusion; it was evidently her comprehensive rendering of "Home, sweet Home" which had produced so profound an impression on this man of culture and lover of music. She felt sure that he was now about to ask her if she would consent to make his home one prolonged sweetness by sharing it with him.

Great, therefore, was her dismay when, after some hesitation and a preamble which might as well have led to the proposal she looked for, as to the one she had to make, he suddenly asked her if she thought there was any chance of the Signorina Santarelli being received as a boarder in Mrs. Braun's establishment.

"She has no home in London," he explained. "I should be averse to placing her in any family with whose members I am not personally acquainted."

"Did the lady come to England without a chaperon?" asked Theodosia, with a glance of consternation.

"Yes," answered St. Helier. "She started from Rome alone, but I met her in Paris on Saturday morning, and we arrived in London the same night."

"Oh!" exclaimed Theodosia, with a look and in a tone which plainly conveyed "shocking" to the listener.

Presently in her iciest tone, she added: "It will be better to address yourself to my mamma on the subject of your friend's residence with us, Mr. St. Helier."

It was only natural that the deluded spinster should show some resentment in the first rebound of her feelings, after the cruel disillusion they had just been subjected to.

"I will make a point of calling upon Mrs. Braun to-morrow morning," said St. Helier; "but I had hoped to gain your consent first, since your great musical knowledge would be of such inestimable benefit to the signorina, who can scarcely play an accompaniment for herself. In return she would, of course, be delighted to assist you in your Italian studies. I heard from the youngest Miss Norman that languages are among your manifold accomplishments."

"Thank you, Mr. St. Helier," answered Theodosia, sufficiently mollified by his welcome compliments to make him the fashionable curtsy before alluded to. "But, believe me," she added, "I have nothing whatever to do with these matters. It was my mamma's whim to introduce strangers into our home circle, and I need scarcely explain to you that I disapprove of her scheme entirely, as well as of all business transactions appertaining to it."

St. Helier bowed, and, much impressed by this feminine snobbishness, retired.

Miss Braun drew herself up very rigidly, desirous by an access of dignity to wipe out the moral stigma St. Helier had inflicted upon her by that shocking revelation regarding the signorina's journey from Paris.

She was inwardly rejoicing, too, in the proud consciousness that she had successfully "put down" an assuming aristocrat, with whom five minutes before she had desired to pass the remainder of their joint lives in one "sweet home."

As Estella bid Hilda farewell, the Italian whispered:

"Pray let us meet again very soon. I am staying at the Charing Cross Hotel; it was most convenient on arriving, but I am—oh! so lonely, so *triste*; will you not come to me?"

"I never go out alone," said Estella; "but you are independent, so pray come and see me; I live close by at No. 40 in the Gardens. Will you not come to-morrow?" she added.

Estella was so fluttered and carried away by her admiration for the stranger, that for the moment she entirely forgot her father's rabid prejudices against all professionals, foreigners especially.

"I will come with an infinite pleasure," said Hilda. "I have my lesson at three, but in the forenoon I shall be at liberty; then I will go to you."

"Thanks," said Estella, with a pleasant consciousness that she had acted kindly, generously even, to a stranger and—a dreaded rival.

Having said good-bye to her host, she followed her sisters out of the house.

Mr. Norman had long before manifested his impatience at the girls' tardy leave-taking.

He, poor man, had not been very well entertained during the last hour, for Mrs. Toegoode, having descried party-giving "possibilities" in the owner of No. 40, had selected him as a fitting recipient for all her experiences in the matter of At-Homes, and she informed him how to manage these at the least possible tariff of expense and inconvenience to oneself, and on the greatest possible amount of assistance to be obtained from one's neighbours.

It will be understood, therefore, how profoundly grateful Mr. Norman felt when he saw his olive branches finally preparing to return home.

CHAPTER VII.

SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

Miss Norman was unusually communicative this evening. It was she who, after dinner, entertained her father with amusing comment and all sorts of gossip (fresh instalments of gossip were the invariable results of a confab with Jonathan).

Estella was mostly silent and self-absorbed in the family circle, but to-night Nettie also was taciturn, and this mood was so unusual to her, that her father, much surprised, inquired:

"And pray what has happened to my little chatterbox this evening?"

"Father dear," pleaded Nettie, with an assumption of gravity which sat very strangely upon the baby face, "I really do wish you wouldn't call me a little chatterbox, and all those nonsensical names; they make other people fancy I am quite a child still, and yet you know I really am grown-up, for I am only two years younger than Estella, whom everyone considers a woman."

"But you are and will remain my particular baby for all that," said her father fondly, and glanced at Mary to see if she had any explanation to offer for this new whim on their little one's part.

But Mary was by nature neither responsive nor sympathetic, and quite unable to analyse the varying moods of her unstable younger sisters.

"I'll say good-night, father dear," said Estella rising.

"Don't you sit up writing to-night, my child," he answered, glancing into her face; "you are looking pale and fagged already. Mary," he added, "I wish you would make a point of going into Estella's room every evening, and seeing her candle put out."

"Father!" cried Estella, with indignant protest in her tone and look, "you are not going to make a baby of me too, are you?"

"Run away, dear, and be thankful the weight of years has not fallen very heavily upon you as yet. If Nettie will go upstairs with you I shall be glad; she will prevent you from working" (Mr. Norman's tone was a trifle ironical as he

used the verb), "and she will not disturb us. I wish to have some serious talk with your sister to-night, for we really must exercise considerable discretion in selecting acquaintances among the promiscuous strangers, who seem suddenly to have invaded the privacy of our Gardens and of our houses."

"Be merciful as you are great, my dear," said Estella to Mary; "don't eliminate the friends who may suit us, though they don't quite please you—good-night, Polly." Then she took Nettie's hand in hers, and so the girls wandered thoughtfully up into the "Den."

Mary, seeing her father leisurely light the pipe in which he blew off each day's worries, knew she had to prepare herself for "a good long talk." So she drew out her crewel-work, a *crèche* pinafore belonging to Estella, whose good intentions in needlework were mostly left with the steadier Mary to accomplish.

Mary inferred from her father's ultra-serious face and manner, that the matters to be discussed between them were of an important character. She therefore, on her own part, resolved to take this opportunity of disclosing certain startling facts to him anent some of the persons they had met to-day.

"That Mrs. Toegoode is an odious woman, Mary," remarked Mr. Norman, as soon as the pipe had begun to draw to his satisfaction. "What do you think of her, my dear?"

"She is rather noisy in her mode of speaking, and decidedly affected in her manner," answered Mary; "but I

don't think there's any real harm in her. People that talk so much, and so gushingly, don't do much mischief. Like effervescing water, their power exhausts itself in fizz and pop."

"This woman is not one of your harmless characters, my child," said Mr. Norman impressively. "For my part, I believe her to be a regular adventuress. She evidently trades on the vanity of her friends, and flatters them, with the sole object of *using* them, their money, their houses, their carriages, their acquaintances, and, for aught I know, their credit too."

"Father!" cried Mary, astonished by this extraordinary display of energy on his part, "I never before knew you to be hard on any woman, and, after all, this one surely deserves some credit, for she supports her idle husband by her own exertions. It is she who keeps the establishment up, by the unflagging work of her brain and her pen."

"Let us grant that she has a smattering of talent, of a clap-trap order, mind," said Mr. Norman, "and that she does write ten hours every day. I don't object to that; I only pray that Heaven may defend me from reading the trash when it is written. But what I do object to is, that this kind of person should be encouraged in decent society, and lauded and applauded as though she were some *rara avis*, whereas she is neither more nor less than all these musicians, and singers, and mountebanks whom some of the mistaken leaders of fashion have of late elected to thrust upon their friends as eligible members of society, treating them in every respect as their equals. For my part, I confess I cannot and will not tolerate this sort of thing."

In the momentary pause that succeeded this outburst, Mr. Norman glanced dubiously at his daughter, curious to note the effect of his words. But Mary continued her stitching tranquilly, and only answered his inquiring glance by a slight smile.

"I don't wish to be harsh in my judgment, Mary," continued her father, "and so, for the sake of argument, I will admit that it is praiseworthy on this woman's part to support the establishment and her worthless husband. But why does she choose to live in a house infinitely above her means, and why does she frequent our Gardens, which we all desire to keep respectable and select?"

"I suppose she enjoys the social recreation-ground as much as we do, father," remarked Mary.

"Let *her* come into it if she likes," said Mr. Norman; "but who can expect us to put up with the sort of people who follow in her wake? I hear she encourages all sorts of foreign impostors—Patagonian noblemen, Indian jugglers with 'bugles' on their arms and ankles, who call themselves Princes, and *soi-disant* Grandes Duchesses."

Mary laughed at this, and said: "Dear father, we have not seen any of these eccentric friends in the Gardens as yet, and I really don't see how it can matter to us if Mrs. Toegoode entertains such persons in her own house—or rather at the houses of her friends—for that seems to be her economical style of procedure."

"All this may affect us more closely than you seem to imagine, my dear," resumed Mr. Norman, "and that is what I must warn you about. Our Estella is so romantic,

her little head is already turned with novel writers and their 'high-falutin' twaddle. She is quite ready, as it is, to kneel down and worship this red-headed scribe, and lend herself to any absurdity the woman may choose to demand of her."

"Estella certainly was very much interested in the lady," said Mary, "and I must admit that Mrs. Adela-ida talks wonderfully well. She is *piquante*, and says a number of sparkling things in an offhand, free-and-easy manner, which is sure to impress Estella favourably."

"Just so, and therefore attend to what I say to you, Mary," resumed Mr. Norman, after a long and profoundly reflective whiff. "This gushing friendship must be nipped in the bud, do you hear?"

"It would be a pity to come to an open rupture just after we have all been introduced," said Mary, and paused to consider in her turn. Presently she added: "If we are to drop Mrs. Toegoode, let it be done by degrees, without any *esclandre*; that will certainly avoid unpleasantness. Then, you know, Adela-ida is very intimate with the countess dowager at No. 1, and has already invited Estella to go to the next grand At-Home there on the 16th of June.

"She has, has she?" asked Mr. Norman, with suddenly reviving interest. "Well, on that subject we need come to no immediate decision, my dear; nor is there any necessity for an open rupture with the literary female. I agree with you, it is always best to manage these matters quietly."

"As for the countess dowager, you are aware, Mary, that no man in England is more loyal to all Conservative traditions than I am, and I cheerfully admit that there is a

rank which enables its possessors to please themselves in selecting their society without being personally degraded by the contact of fiddlers, tenors, and mountebanks generally. According to Mr. Latimer, who, by-the-way, is a very shrewd man, both as regards the social and commercial world, the countess's At-Homes mostly consist of what her ladyship is pleased to term 'celebrities,' and you will readily understand, my dear, that it would not be without much consideration that I should allow one of my daughters to be seen in such, possibly, mixed society."

Poor Mr. Norman floundered painfully over this evasive and contradictory statement.

"Very likely Mrs. Toegoode will forget that she ever invited Estella," said Mary reassuringly. "She also, and in the most impressive manner, asked that Italian to accompany her."

"The signorina?" inquired Mr. Norman; "well, I admire Mrs. Toegoode's good taste in that instance. It appeared to me that Miss Hilda was a superior person, quite a lady in fact, and I could find no fault with her manners or conversation. She was modest and without affectation of any kind."

"It is difficult to judge from appearances," remarked Mary drily. "They often mislead us."

Her father smiled as he heard his sedate daughter glibly delivering one of his favourite platitudes.

"You were not favourably impressed by this lady, eh, Mary?" he inquired.

"I thought her agreeable, and I admired her singing

very much," said Mary; "but Miss Braun told me something —and——"

"Whatever Miss Braun has told you against a handsome woman must be regarded as having been perverted by a jealous cross-grained spinster, and cannot therefore be implicitly relied upon. Had Miss Braun any derogatory facts to lay before you?"

Mr. Norman prided himself on his stern sense of justice, and felt that he was giving a special instance of it in refusing to condemn a public singer, except on the evidence of unimpeachable testimony.

Strengthened by this conscious rectitude, he resumed:

"There cannot be much harm in this young lady, since Mr. St. Helier, who is a *gentleman*, has invited you to meet her at his house."

"That is the difficulty," said Mary, colouring; "I fear Mr. St. Helier was ill-advised in taking such a step. It appears that he himself admitted to Miss Braun that the signorina is here without any chaperon, and that *he* went over to Paris to fetch her."

"Good God!" cried Mr. Norman, rising in a sudden heat of excitement. "Can this be true?"

"Miss Braun may be jealous and spiteful, but I don't think she would dare to tell me an untruth," said Mary, who was herself thoroughly discomfited by the turn affairs were taking.

"Then St. Helier is no gentleman!" cried Mr. Norman angrily; "he has insulted my girls and me. But he shall be made to answer for this affront. I will write at once

and demand an explanation. Meanwhile, Mary, you give strict orders to your sisters, and to the servants, that neither St. Helier nor any of his party are to enter our house—do you hear?"

Mr. Norman was thoroughly ruffled, and was walking excitedly up and down the room.

He had allowed himself to think of Mr. St. Helier as a most desirable *parti* for one of his girls, and therefore felt this disenchantment to be doubly cruel.

"I suppose I had better write at once?" he said, glancing at Mary for acquiescence.

"I should say certainly not, father," answered Mary decisively. "We know nothing against this singer, who, as you said, appeared modest and ladylike. Even if Mr. St. Helier did fetch her from Paris, other friends may have been with them, and the whole affair is capable of satisfactory explanation.

"Pray do not act rashly in the matter, dear. Satisfy yourself about it before you take any steps. Mr. St. Helier is a most desirable acquaintance for all of us, and it would be a thousand pities to blame or offend him, when perhaps he is not in fault at all. I feel convinced he could not so far have forgotten himself as to invite us to meet this—a—a—person of doubtful character."

"You are a wise girl, Mary," said her father, resuming his armchair and his pipe. "We will reconsider this matter when I have made further inquiries. Meanwhile, remember there is to be no communication with St. Helier or the singer. They are to be considered in moral quarantine. You had better go to your sisters at once," he added, "they

are sure to be up still; tell them whatever you please, but above all things forbid any intercourse with Mr. St. Helier, or his friends, for the present."

Mary rose.

"One moment, my dear," cried her father, detaining her. "I saw you talking to that noisy woman whom Mrs. Toegoode called the Shoddy-Princess. She is vulgar, or rather, ***Amurrican***, but she appears to go into society, for St. Helier tells me she is wealthy, and moved in the best circles in Rome."

"Yes, father?"

"Has she not taken a house in the Gardens too?"

"Yes, father, and she asked me to be sure and call upon her, as we are neighbours."

"So much the better," said Mr. Norman. "What are your plans for to-morrow?"

"I have promised to spend the morning with Mrs. Fraser, who is laid up again—poor thing."

"Very well then, in the afternoon you will put on your best bonnet, and go and call upon the Shoddy-Princess. Tell her that you wished to lose no time in bidding her welcome to our Gardens, and——"

"And then you want me to ascertain the particulars of the signorina's position from her?" remarked Mary, who understood her father thoroughly.

"Exactly," said he; "she will soon set your doubts at rest, for she has a handsome young son to look after, and knew this Miss Hilda in Rome, so you may be sure she is thoroughly acquainted with that young lady's social and moral status."

CHAPTER VIII.

RIVALRY.

How little the younger girls cosily chatting up in the "Den" imagined the violent scene being enacted between Mary and their father below.

"I am so glad we ran away and left them to have their serious talk," said Nettie, flinging herself into the lowest easy-chair she could find. "Now, Stella, let us sit in judgment on our neighbours too, and see where our mercy ought to come in. First and foremost, tell me what you think of Ronald Vivian?"

But as Estella was about to speak, Nettie held up beseeching hands. "No, don't, don't tell me anything at all," she cried, "until you hear my verdict. You're in love, you know, Stella dear, and so of course you're prejudiced. No, don't contradict me, you must listen first."

Estella paused irresolute, and then, perhaps to gain time to hide her confusion, perhaps from mere force of habit, drew forth the momentous note-book, and assured her sister that she was quite prepared to listen to all she had to say.

"Well then," began Nettie, whose eyes were shining with quite a new light, "I think Mr. Ronald Vivian the handsomest, the beautifullest, the most romantic, and the most interesting man I have ever seen, or talked or listened to."

"He is handsome, certainly," remarked Estella—"but very young."

"But very young!" repeated Nettie, "you say that as though it were a crime, Stella. You're prejudiced, I knew you would be. Here we've been all raving about that gray-headed solemn Mr. St. Helier of yours, and setting him up as the *ne plus ultra* of mankind, until we really all began to believe he was wonderfully handsome, clever, and brilliant. Now a young rival appears upon the scene, who really *is* what the other seemed to be. And so our eyes are suddenly opened to the unromantic fact that Mr. St. Helier is middle-aged and commonplace, whereas Mr. Vivian——"

"You are talking utter nonsense, Nettie," said Estella crossly, and looked as indignant as she felt.

"Oh, don't be vexed, Stella darling," said Nettie, laughing, "I could not resist teazing you a little bit, because you are so awfully proud of your Mr. St. Helier. You must know that I did not mean a single word of all that unkind speech, of course."

"I really don't know why you should persist in calling him *my* Mr. St. Helier, Nettie," remarked Estella mollified, but with a rueful look and tone. "It seems to me the signorina is the only one among us who has any claim upon him, and hers appears to be of a serious character."

"Now *you* are talking nonsense, Stella," cried Nettie promptly. "I thought you were labouring under some delusion. How like your clever imagination! Of course you won't be satisfied with simple facts, but must rush into romantic grievances, and—and—'all that sort of thing,' to quote Master Jonathan."

"May I inquire the drift of these lucid remarks?" inquired Estella, laughing.

"I'll tell you," said Nettie, "what I suppose you will be very much surprised to hear. You are all wrong about Miss Hilda and Mr. St. Helier. It's Ronald who is in love with her—I don't say that she returns his affection, mind, though I cannot imagine that anyone could help caring for such a darling if he wanted her to do so. That he *likes* her I know, for I coaxed him to converse with and to confide in me—there! isn't that a proper sentence for a novel, eh?"

"What did Mr. Vivian confide to you, Nettie?" asked Estella, trying to laugh, but compelled to be grave by the serious nature of her thoughts.

"He told me that he had induced his mother to come to London as soon as he ascertained the signorina's intention of studying here. That was a confession, wasn't it, Stella?"

"Tell me more," pursued Estella eagerly; "did he give you any account of the signorina; who is she really?"

"She is the only daughter of an old Italian, who has a Fine-Art Repository in Rome."

"A shop or a museum?" asked Estella, with increasing interest.

"From Mr. Ronald's description I should think it was a mixture of the two," explained Nettie. "It certainly is very different to what we call a repository here, with Berlin wool in shades, and water-colour sketches by unknown authors—no, *Artists*—craving your lady authorship's pardon."

"Oh Nettie, don't be so foolish, dearest," pleaded

Estella; "if you only knew how much I like and admire the signorina, I am sure you would not teaze me with all this nonsense."

"All right, Stell, old darling," said Nettie, realising that her sister was in no joking mood. "I'll tell you everything as solemnly as if you were a judge." So speaking, she flung herself at her sister's feet, and rested her fair head against Estella's knees.

She little knew, poor child, how opportune her remark was about her sister being a judge—nor did she in the least comprehend the contending emotions at work within Estella's bosom, the striving to judge Hilda fairly, and the bitter jealousy which so nearly blinded her to the Italian's evident merits.

"Did Mr. Vivian tell you where Hilda and Mr. St. Helier became acquainted, and how?" was her next leading question.

"There is someone tapping at your door," whispered Nettie, half alarmed.

"Open the door, girls!" cried Mary, repeating her summons; "why do you lock yourselves in like this?"

"The door should have been left ajar for your majesty, had we known that you intended to honour us with a visit to-night," said Nettie, moved to uncontrollable laughter by the dignity of one sister, and the consternation of the other.

"I don't believe you have honoured me with so late a visit since we first came to London, Mary," said Estella, but her tone betrayed no gratification at this unusual proceeding of Mary's.

"No, Stella," replied Mary, panting, "and you may be sure I should not have struggled up to the top of this house now, had I not a very particular reason for coming."

"Sit down and get your breath back, Polly," suggested Nettie, offering her sister a chair.

"Girls!" cried Mary, looking very important, "father is furious."

Her sisters regarded her with amazement. Estella was the first to recover herself, and promptly asked:

"What have you been saying to make him so, Mary?"

"I said little enough of any sort," said Mary deprecatingly, "and I even managed to tranquillise him a bit, and persuaded him at last to take no decisive step until he has made further inquiries. Meanwhile he has asked me to tell you at once that we are none of us to speak to Mr. St. Helier or the signorina, on pain of father's serious displeasure."

"Heavens!" cried Estella, clasping her hands in entreaty and looking as anxious and alarmed as she felt.

"Polly dear, do explain what has happened—what has been said or done to vex father? You seem to forget that you are keeping us in horrid suspense."

It was Nettie who spoke now, she also was flushed and nervous, but that was in pure sympathy with Estella.

Then Mary (morally) girded up her loins, and with a severe look and in a severe tone, repeated Miss Braun's authentic information, and personally cautioned the girls

against having anything to do with such unprincipled persons, until their good faith was re-established, beyond all possibility of cavil.

"I don't believe there's anything wrong about either Miss Hilda or Mr. St. Helier," declared Nettie fiercely. "Who can possibly make out that there's any harm in the fact of a man's being polite, and meeting a foreign poor creature like that and bringing her over the sea from Paris? *Harm*, indeed! why it is simple good-naturedness, that's all it is; and I say bravo! Mr. St. Helier."

"As you cannot possibly be a competent judge on matters you don't understand, Baby dear," said Mary evasively, "it really would be more becoming on your part to remain silent."

"Well! if that isn't the height of impertinence!" cried Nettie. "Here am I ordered to be silent, and why, pray? Why, because I stick up for people I like, and I say again, and wouldn't mind saying it out before the assembled Grenfellians, that there is no harm and no wrong about either the signorina or Mr. St. Helier."

Nettie raised her voice so alarmingly that Estella besought her to moderate it.

"Stella!" cried Nettie now, turning to her, "don't *you* understand that if there was anything for Mr. St. Helier to be ashamed of he would never have mentioned his journey with Miss Hilda at all?"

"That is plausible, certainly," remarked Mary.

"It's positive," cried Nettie; "and the only harm is in that envious mischief-making old cat of a Theodosia. She

is at the bottom of it all, I know; but I'll find a way of punishing her, as surely as my name is—what it is."

"Henrietta?" suggested Mary, aware that her sister detested that cognomen.

Nettie, however, was too much in earnest now to waste her resources in small-shot. She preferred to reserve her strength for some future bomb-shell, so allowed Mary's taunt to pass unheeded.

Estella was silent, but her face betrayed the trouble in her mind. After a long reflective pause:

"Did you reason with father, Mary dear?" she inquired meekly. "He always listens to you, because you are quiet and wise and considerate."

"Indeed I did, Stella," said Mary, "and not only on your account, either; for I also consider Mr. St. Helier a very desirable acquaintance for all of us, and was grieved that father should take offence, where I am positive none was intended."

"Of course not," pronounced Nettie authoritatively.

"Of course not," echoed Estella.

"Just what I said," resumed Mary; "and so at last I persuaded father to defer taking any decisive steps in the matter, until he had ascertained the facts of the case for himself."

As Mary turned towards the door, she remembered her father's special injunction.

"You understand now," she said, "that there is to be no communication whatever with either Mr. St. Helier or his friend until all this is settled. Good-night; now, pray don't sit up any longer, either of you."

"Good-night, beloved, good-night," sang Nettie the irrepressible, mimicking Jonathan's vague attempts at falsetto.

"Nettie," whispered Estella, as soon as Mary had closed the door, "Nettie, what shall I do? I begged the signorina to come and see me, and she is coming to-morrow in the forenoon!"

"Whew!" whistled Nettie, as she performed a double shuffle with her feet, and beat an imaginary tambourine with her hands.

Estella felt herself bound to remonstrate with her sister on these unlady-like proceedings, but failed signally, and smiled where she felt she ought to frown.

"It's all very well for you to play the clown and laugh at everything, Nettie," she said, in a very rueful tone; "but pray, what would you do if you found yourself in such a terrible strait as mine is now?"

"Laugh the louder, and find a broad way out of it," answered Nettie promptly.

"Oh Baby, can't you help me to do that?" cried Estella, nervously clasping her hands.

"I'll manage it all, if you'll be good and trust me," said Nettie. "Nothing could be simpler."

Estella looked at her young sister in silent amazement.

"You are quite surprised at my 'powers of resource,' aren't you now?" asked Nettie; "and isn't that phrase about 'resource' as ready to go into a novel as I was to quote it out of 'Never for Ever,' which I read to-day?

"Well, listen, madam, I'll my subtle plans unfold," Nettie continued with importance. "To-morrow, at 11 A.M., Miss Mary goes over to Mrs. Fraser's, and they'll talk servants and gruel and omelettes until they get hungry. Then Mary will have to stay to luncheon, of course.

"Father goes to the City to-morrow—I heard him tell Johnny so. Thus you and I shall have the coast clear. I shall watch for Hilda at the study window and open the door for her myself. *She* won't miss the servants, and they'll be none the wiser. She did not mean to stay to luncheon, did she?"

"How thankful I am that I did not invite her!" said Estella, with an audible sigh of relief.

Nettie construed her sister's last sentence into acquiescence in her plans.

"I am glad you think we can manage her visit," she said, "without getting into trouble at home, and without hurting her feelings, which would be wickedly cruel to a lonely stranger like that. I'll tell you what Mr. Ronald said about her, to-morrow, but I can assure you to-night that it was all to her credit. Bye, bye, dearest," added Nettie; "sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof."

"I wish to-morrow were over as well," said Estella. "It's very awful to have to smuggle in a visitor like a felon, and to think how cross father would be——"

"Don't think, dear. Enjoy the romance of it, put it all into your book; but there, it must be the hero who is let in on the sly by Gwendolen, not a harmless lady like the signorina. Good-night, Stella, don't look worried; be

thankful you have a wise little sister like me to settle your transformation scenes for you so cleverly."

* * * * *

Poor Estella had but little sleep that night.

It was the first time in her life that she took an uneasy conscience to bed with her, and that restless companion left her no peace. Even if she fell into a short slumber, it was troubled and broken by the consciousness of what she had to undertake on the morrow.

At last the morrow came, a bright and blessed relief after the dark misery of the past night.

Mary, orderly and methodical as usual, attended to her household duties directly after breakfast, but in giving her various orders to the servants, she omitted that word of caution as to the non-admittance of certain visitors. Such an order would set them wondering and talking below stairs, and really give them something to talk about.

Why should Mr. St. Helier suddenly be forbidden the house now, when less than a week ago he was an honoured guest? There was in any case no chance of his calling to-day, thought Mary, and therefore put the distasteful word of warning off to some more urgent future occasion.

At half-past ten o'clock Mary started on her visit of charity.

Estella was, as usual, settled in the "study" by that time.

Her "work" was now assuming a tangible form, and she really devoted herself to it with creditable assiduity. She had actually completed thirty-five pages of MS., which

she called her "first chapter." The chief characteristic of that first chapter certainly was its inordinate length, but Estella had determined not to be hampered by any of the traditionary forms of literature in her authorship.

She said she did not believe in cut-and-dried genius, nor did she approve of chapters that were made to measure like a dress or a coat. The chapters in "Gwendolen" were to be arranged according to momentary inspiration, and in no wise to be subservient to such inconvenient accessories as climax, leading notions, etc. etc.

In spite of these idiosyncrasies, however, Gwendolen (on paper) had really commenced to live and move, and the opening chapter read pleasantly.

"Awfully scrumptious," Nettie declared it to be, and vowed she was dying to get to the next one. In the opening, Gwendolen found herself in a dilemma, and Nettie was feverishly impatient to find how so charming a heroine would get out of her difficulties. "Do tell me, *only me*, what she does next, Stella," "the baby" had pleaded. But Estella, like other provoking oracles, considered that silence meant power, and refused to enlighten her sister in the least.

It was well for the girl that she had found a really engrossing occupation in these eventful days. Had it not been for that MS. she would have spent her time in brooding on her secret admiration for St. Helier, and such brooding must have proved injurious to an imaginative and highly sensitive temperament like hers.

Now in the novel there was a ready safety-valve, and in

the overcharged heart of the heroine the writer's own feelings found a congenial vent.

On this particular morning, however, Estella found it very difficult to settle steadily to her work. It was fortunate, therefore, that Gwendolen had just been launched in her first conversation with the hero. For the writer soon became so absorbed and engrossed in the progress of her story that she did not heed the flying moments nor pay any attention to Nettie, who had taken up her position at the study window, which looked out upon the road. Thence any arriving visitor could be observed without difficulty.

Estella was not a little startled, therefore, when Nettie suddenly jumped up exclaiming:

"Stella, they're both here!"

"Who?" cried Estella; but she was forewarned of the answer by that terrible ache and throbbing in her heart and in her temples which Hilda's advent had caused her on a previous occasion.

"Estella, come and look!" cried Nettie impatiently; "they can't see you through the curtain; they have come in a hansom, and—why, they are not coming here at all, they have gone to Mrs. Braun's."

Estella had seen them too. Furtively glancing over her sister's shoulder, she had watched the care with which St. Helier helped the signorina to alight, and hated that lady for the happy smile with which she thanked her cavalier.

"What can they be up to now?" asked Nettie, in quite a flutter of curiosity.

"I am sure I cannot tell you, dear," answered her sister in a broken voice. Indeed the tears she strove to swallow were choking her. But she was a brave child, and repressing the feeling of pained perplexity which was unnerving her, she resolutely re-commenced her writing.

There was, after all, considerable relief to be found in the cutting sarcasms with which Gwendolen suddenly railed at "perfidious man," to the great consternation of the meek and love-stricken hero.

Meanwhile Nettie had disappeared, but now returned, her hat on her back, her gloves in her hand, and the sauciest smile on her sweet childish face.

"I watched them go off again," she said, "and now I shall pop round to the Brauns' and find out all about this mystery." Estella was far too anxious for its solution to check her sister's curiosity. "Cheer up, dear old Stell," cried Nettie laughing, "I promise you a correct verbal report with appropriate action within half-an-hour. You shall know all that has happened, as though you had been present yourself."

Nettie had already closed the door of the study, when a sudden thought stopped her. Returning again:

"Stella," she whispered, "you must take up your position behind this window-curtain now. The signorina is sure to be here directly, no doubt he has just taken her on to Mrs. Vivian's; they're making a regular round, you see."

"To proclaim their engagement?" suggested Estella wistfully, and Nettie clapping her hands cried:

"Oh then, Ronald can't marry her!" but instantly

repented her rash speech, and having hurriedly kissed her sister she escaped from the room and the house, to avoid further blunders.

CHAPTER IX.

AT NO. 39.

MISS NETTIE, on her arrival at Mrs. Braun's, was straightway shown into the drawing-room, where Mrs. Braun and her daughter were engaged in a conversation, which, to judge by their flushed faces and the angry tones Nettie had heard in the hall, could not have been of a pleasing character.

"So Mr. St. Helier and 'our musical friend' have just called upon you!" cried Nettie, with irrepressible mimicry, and a rampant curiosity which defied good manners.

"Yes, mine dear," said Mrs. Braun, and continued to speak with much volubility and emphasis.

"I like dat young girl, she is modest and goot, I am sure she is goot, she has soft true eyes like a innocent calf, poor ting!" The *th* became an impossibility to Mrs. Braun whenever she spoke hurriedly. "*You* like her, my dear Nettie, is it not?" she inquired, and reading a bright affirmative in her visitor's face, she continued:

"Dat Mr. St. Helier, he is a gentleman, and he ask me to give dat young stranger with no friends in dis land and no home, my maternal—yes, he say my *maternal* care. I note his word, so you don't laugh, Dosie, and I will have

dat poor lone child, and I *will* give her my care. De singing will be goot for Dosie, and so will de company."

"I am not so sure about the company," said Theodosia with a toss of her head. "I want to know who and what this singer is, before we receive her into our home," she added, turning towards Nettie, but talking *at* her mother. "We are not lodging-house keepers! If my mamma chooses to fill her house by inviting a few *gentlemen* to reside with us, that is no reason why we are to have a miscellaneous collection of foreigners here."

Theodosia appeared to have multiplied the signorina, as though she saw her in a kaleidoscope.

"I am so glad you like the lady, Mrs. Braun," said Nettie diplomatically, "and perhaps Miss Theodosia will think better of her, when she knows all about her."

Seeing that mother and daughter both prepared themselves to listen to any account of the Italian Nettie might choose to give them, that youthful diplomatist at once resumed her task of vindicating the "harmless stranger."

"You remember Mrs. Vivian, that showy American, Miss Braun?" asked Nettie.

"Of course," answered Dosie; "who could forget that splendid cardinal costume with the maize pipings?"

"Well," said Nettie, "Mrs. Vivian, who was among all the swells at Rome, knew the signorina there, and admires her very much, and so does her son Mr. Ronald, who has purposely followed her from Italy—and is desperately in love with her, I know."

Brave little Nettie! she neither blushed nor hesitated as

she spoke the words; and Theodosia, relieved from her most poignant anxiety lest the signorina might interfere with the admiration she, Dosie, claimed from Mr. Latimer, at once began to look with less displeasure on her mother's scheme.

"Mr. Ronald told me that the signorina has been studying music for the last three years, and means to devote herself entirely to that art," continued Nettie. "She has come to London hoping to get an engagement at one of the operas. He also said that she is very good and very clever, and that it would be an *honour to any of us ladies* to be chosen as a friend of hers. Then he begged that my sisters and I would be kind to her as she is a stranger here, and all alone."

"Dat poor young ting, I told you so, Dosie," put in Mrs. Braun compassionately.

"But why should she be all alone?" inquired Miss Braun, who was not thoroughly satisfied as yet.

"Her mother, who was an Englishwoman, is dead," said Nettie; "her father is old, and has some business in Rome, which he cannot leave. He begged Mr. St. Helier, who is a friend of his, to look after the young lady and help her to find a suitable home; and what better plan could he possibly have hit upon, than to ask you and your mother to take care of her?"

"You speak de troos, mine child," said Mrs. Braun, "and it is of great credit to you to show such goot feelings, and such a goot sense. You speak just like your dear sister Mary would do, I know," said Mrs. Braun.

Nettie dared not assent to this unlikely supposition, but she quite appreciated the compliment it implied.

"And now, mine Dosie, what you say?" inquired Mrs. Braun.

"I say that under the circumstances I shall not interfere, mamma, and you can do as you please."

"Of course you will let her come?" asked Nettie.

"Of course we will," said the old lady. "As Dosie was not so very agreeable when they was calling here, I said we would write to settle the matter. So now, Dosie, you will write the letter for me, please, and don't forget to say that the money must always be paid in advance on the first of each month. Business is business, my dear Miss Nettie, though you don't know anything about that. But even a lonely stranger must be able to pay for a superior home when it is open to her."

Finding that the matter was thus satisfactorily settled, Nettie returned home.

In compliance with her mother's urgent request, Theodosia immediately wrote to the signorina, to tell her that a room would be at her disposal on the following day, but she absolutely refused to allude to the question of terms in any but the vaguest way.

Mrs. Braun, finding remonstrance useless, and determined that there should be no mistake about the commercial part of the engagement, yielded in silence, and patiently waited until her dear Dosie had gone upstairs to dress for luncheon. Then the old lady set about writing an explanatory note to Mr. St. Helier on her own

account, which she at once despatched to his residence by a messenger.

"Is anyone with Miss Estella?" inquired Nettie of the servant who opened the door to her, on her return from Mrs. Braun's.

"Yes, miss, a young lady."

"Provoking!" exclaimed Nettie, who was vexed with herself for having come in at the heel of the hunt.

She had intended to manœuvre a successful visit that none should know of; and now, of course, the whole affair would go down to the kitchen; the servants would wonder who the young lady was who had been let in by Miss Estella herself, while the gentleman who accompanied the visitor drove off in a hansom.

Nettie was quite aware of the fact that the kitchen window looked out to the front as well as that of the "study" above it, and that the domestics at No. 40 had plenty of time for speculation and gossip on their scantily occupied hands. Should she confide in Chapman? was Nettie's next thought; should she tell that discreet parlour-maid that Miss Estella's visitor was not to be mentioned? No; that would only make the matter still more important, thought Nettie, and stood in the hall pondering.

"But, oh! who was this? *Father!*" The dread conviction that he had come home was revealed to Nettie by the sound of the latch-key—for Mr. Norman alone was possessed of that convenience.

"Well, Baby, and where do you come from?" he asked

coming in leisurely and wiping his feet with provoking care, as though they had never known a brush.

"What on earth has brought you home at this hour of the day?" Nettie inquired uncomfortably.

"I have made an appointment here with a gentleman. Has anyone called?" he asked the servant, who had lingered in the hall when she heard the master's key.

"Only the young lady, sir, who came to see Miss Estella."

"Who is she?" Mr. Norman inquired of Nettie.

"I haven't seen Stella yet; I have only just come in," said Nettie evasively. "I'll go into the drawing-room now, dear, and come back and tell you."

But there was something unusual in candid Nettie's face and manner which betrayed her. She could not deceive placidly, and Mr. Norman was not slow to read these signs of agitation.

"It is that infernal Toegoode," he thought, but he forbore putting his suspicion into words."

"Well, run and see the mysterious visitor, Baby," he said, "for I have letters to write."

Thankful to be dismissed without further questioning, Nettie did literally obey her father's injunction by running up six stairs at a time—on into her own room. Having there left her hat and gloves, she descended to the drawing-room. Yes; there was Hilda talking eagerly to Estella, and both looked animated and happy. Should she warn her sister that their father had returned? No; that would make matters disagreeable for the visitor, for Estella would at once become constrained in her manner.

Determined to keep matters as pleasant as possible for all concerned, Nettie, having shaken hands with the signorina, took up her position facing the drawing-room door, and sat there in silent trepidation, awaiting the next comer. Would that be father or Mary?"

Mr. Norman had gone into the study by this time, and, summoning Miss Chapman, began to cross-examine that very discreet functionary.

"I expect a gentleman," said the master. "Did you say no one had called?"

"No one but the young lady for Miss Estella, sir—a strange young lady." Chapman volunteered this piece of information.

"How do you mean, strange?"

"She has never been here before, sir."

"How did she come?"

"In a hansom cab with a gentleman, sir, who left the lady and drove away."

Mr. Norman gave a shrewd guess now that St. Helier was the culprit, and grew angry as he said: "Send Miss Nettie to me immediately."

Very reluctantly Miss Nettie walked into the study.

"You want me, father?" she inquired, and stopped surprised at the strange sound of her own voice.

"Yes," he answered, confronting her. "Who is with your sister, Nettie?"

"I only just peeped into the room," said Nettie, and said no more. She looked defiant, but she could not bring her lips to speak a further untruth.

"Don't answer me naughtily, Nettie, and don't try to tell fibs," said her father. "You know your sister is with that Italian woman against my express orders, and Mr. St. Helier, I find, drove her to the door. Now, if he supposes that I am going to allow my girls to associate with all these foreigners and adventurers" (these terms with Mr. Norman were occasionally synonymous), "I must put a stop to this sort of thing at once. I'll just write——"

"No, no, father; please don't write!" cried Nettie alarmed. "Haven't you always warned us all never to commit ourselves to paper?"

Mr. Norman looked at his Baby, and smiled deprecatingly; but he took her advice all the same.

"On second thoughts, I won't write," said he; "but I'll call upon him and demand an explanation. I consider he has taken a most unwarrantable liberty in bringing this girl here uninvited."

"No, father; Estella invited her," cried Nettie promptly, but instantly regretted the rash words, for she saw the cloud on her father's brow deepen, and knew that instead of helping her sister she had only got her into worse trouble.

"Estella chose to invite this girl against my orders!" said Mr. Norman severely. "Then Miss Estella must be brought to her senses. I am master here, remember, and I will not allow any one of you to associate with persons of whom I do not thoroughly approve, and about whom I am in ignorance." His own words fanned the flames of Mr. Norman's rising wrath. "Good heavens!" he cried, "if

this sort of thing is allowed to go on, we shall have the rascals out of the pantomimes calling here next, and the ballet girls, and the Lord knows who."

What further terrible consequences Mr. Norman might have foretold as likely to arise from the fact that his daughter was now closeted with a foreign singer cannot be known, for Chapman tapped at the study door and informed her master that the gentleman he was expecting was in the dining-room. Mr. Norman went out of the study looking very stern, and poor Nettie was left forlorn among the ruins of her diplomacy.

"What *will* Estella say?" she thought despondently. "One thing is certain—I am a fool, but father—yes—father's a—a *tyrant!*"

Having come to which unfilial conclusion, Nettie rose with a toss of her head, but soon sank back into her chair again, and burying her baby face in her hands, leant over the table and had a good cry.

CHAPTER X.

ST. HELIER'S PERPLEXITIES.

St. Helier had some misgivings in his mind the morning on which he started for the Charing Cross Hotel, intending to fetch the signorina thence, and accompany her to Grenfell Gardens.

He was a man of the world, well acquainted with les convenances; and Hilda's father, his old friend the art collector, had given him no slight test of friendship and faith, when he asked him to take care of his attractive girl in London and travel about with her in the doubtful capacity of brother, friend, or paterfamilias.

He felt that the position was a compromising one, both for the girl and himself. Had he done quite the right thing, he wondered, in introducing her to all his friends? He certainly had well considered the matter before doing so, and had come to the conclusion that the best plan was to enlist the *ladies* in her favour.

Those charming Norman girls would be capital allies for the young foreigner. He had quite longed to see Hilda and Estella together, and felt there must be sympathy between those kindred souls.

Then again, he was troubled by certain doubts as to his policy. Perhaps he was running a risk which for Hilda's sake he most earnestly deprecated. Women were, as he knew to his cost, dangerous weapons to play with.

Still, Hilda must make friends, and he must aid her, and surely it was best to go to work openly and enlist the people he most desired her to become acquainted with, in her favour from the first.

He had pondered long over the charge before he undertook it. But after much reflection he had assured Signor Santarelli that he would do his utmost to serve his old friend's motherless girl. Indeed, he felt that it would be delightful to him to have some personal concern in the

life of so interesting an art student. What a glorious voice the girl had, and—and——

Here St. Helier left the dry land of policy and les convenances, and wandered off into the realms of fancy. ——A voice had such a charm for him—but it was no use dreaming, so the clock striking the hour warned him, the hour he had appointed to fetch Hilda in, that they together might call upon the dragoness at No. 39.

It was thus St. Helier mentally apostrophised Miss Theodosia. He thought her odious, but highly respectable, and respectability he felt to be the chief desideratum in Hilda's surroundings at this critical moment. Mrs. Braun had not entered into his calculations as yet; Theodosia represented the boarding-house to him with all its advantages, musical society, and the (moral) bath included.

Mrs. Braun was an obscurity, offering no difficulties to his mind. Had she presented herself to his thought at all, it would only have been as a dweller in the kitchen, and general superintendent of the saucepans.

He was therefore totally unprepared for her active and benevolent interference, when he presented himself with the signorina in the drawing-room of No. 39, hoping to arrange for his young friend's lodging in such very respectable quarters.

When he saw Mrs. Braun, with her good smile and blossoming cap, he was prepossessed in her favour, and her odd broken English pleased and amused him as much as her homely manner and thoroughly honest German face.

"I shall be able to tell my old friend, the signorina's

father, that I have found a good home and truly maternal care for his only child, if you will promise to look after her, madam."

Thus spoke St. Helier, as he rose to take his leave, and added impressively: "I shall await your decision with the utmost impatience."

"We will write to-day, sir; Dosie will write, be sure, letters are very easy tings for her, she has an education—ach! mein Himmel! it costed much money, but it is *fine*."

"I like that dear old lady so much," said Hilda, as she found herself in the hansom again; "I do hope she will let me come and live with her."

"And you really would prefer that to accepting Mrs. Vivian's invitation?" asked St. Helier.

"Prefer it! yes, indeed, a hundred thousand times," cried Hilda, flushing unaccountably at this proposition.

"Don't be indignant, Hilda," said St. Helier gravely; "even if you do not appreciate Mrs. Vivian's offer, you must admit that it was kindly meant."

"I know it, and I am quite willing to be most polite, and to thank her in the most courteous manner now, with you, but—oh! you do not quite understand, Mr. St. Helier."

He certainly did not, but he contented himself by ascribing the girl's strange reluctance to accept Mrs. Vivian's pressing invitation to womanly caprice, a power he had learnt to fear and respect many a long year ago.

Throughout their short stay at Mrs. Vivian's new and magnificent abode, Hilda was shy, silent, and reserved, leaving all the conversation to the Shoddy-Princess and

Mr. St. Helier, who was not sorry when a movement of Hilda's warned him that she was impatient to take her leave.

"And now to see that charming Miss Estella again!" cried the signorina, clapping her hands with glee.

In two minutes more the hansom had deposited them at the door of No. 40.

Estella, from her coign of vantage, saw them arrive, but her courage failed her—she could not open the door to Mr. St. Helier—whose visit she was in no sense prepared for.

"Are you not coming too?" asked Hilda, seeing St. Helier turn from the door and descend the steps.

"No," said he, looking up at her somewhat ruefully as he stood on the pavement below. "No; I could not be so cruel as to interrupt a young ladies' *tête-à-tête*. I should be terribly in the way, and you would vote me a bore."

"A bore—what is that?" inquired Hilda, opening her beautiful eyes.

But St. Helier did not stop to explain.

He merely shook hands hurriedly, wished Hilda "good-bye," but before he had walked a step returned again, and said nervously: "Be sure to remember me to the Misses Norman, and—don't forget to let me know what Miss Braun writes to you." Then he walked away with briskly resolute steps.

"Can it be possible that I am growing shy?" he asked himself, as he felt a warm glow of colour mount to his face.

"Bah!" was the indignant mental reply, and he gave

his cane an impatient switch. "Positively I'm an old fool," he continned his reflections; "at my time of life to be thinking of two pretty young girls."

Vexed and impatient as he certainly was at his folly, he could not keep his mind away from the drawing-room at No. 40, where his imagination persisted in conjuring up a vivid picture of the two pretty girls with their sweet soft ways and their musical voices chattering to each other, and —"old fool" as he was—it relieved him thus to address himself reproachfully; he heartily wished he was with them. Ah me! how many years had passed since he had ever given *any* woman a thought!

Like many an ardent youngster, he had paid dearly for his first burst of adoration at the shrine of woman. His idol had proved a designing trickster, who had well nigh ruined him.

The silver threads in his hair were marking how many a long year had passed over his head since then, and he was still a bachelor. So, he had vowed, he would always remain; one disfiguring scar in a lifetime was cruel enough.

His little home, that *ne plus ultra*, as Nettie had called it, now represented the circumference of his wants and his ambitions. And yet in the face of these incontrovertible facts, here he was wishing himself in the drawing-room of No. 40, in the company of *two* young girls.

With a grim smile he muttered: "Well, they say there's safety in numbers;" having come to which proverbially-wise conclusion, he opened the door of his house with his latch-key.

On the whole he felt satisfied with his morning's work, and was pleased to know that he could conscientiously devote the rest of the day to his writing and to his books.

Mrs. O'Neill, his housekeeper, had been his late mother's confidential maid. On her mistress's death, the faithful creature, who was herself a widow and childless, had installed herself as St. Helier's housekeeper.

"As good as a mother, and better than a wife to him," was the woman's own account of herself. She had nursed him in his infancy, watched over and participated in the few frolics of his somewhat sober boyhood, and proved her stedfast devotion to him in the trials of his youth.

Thus all the barriers which usually keep master and servant so far apart, had disappeared between St. Helier and his old Hibernian nurse, who now ruled his home with discretion, cleanliness, and economy.

Such domestic treasures are rare, but they may be met with occasionally even in the Emerald Isle. St. Helier's house, his meals, and his linen, were all faultlessly attended to by Mrs. O'Neill.

"Shure, sur, what w'd ye be afther wantin' a wife for, unless maybe it would be one with a fortin enough to keep ye both?"

Such was Mrs. O'Neill's worldly-wise rejoinder, when her master was in a bantering mood, and told her that he felt he was neglecting his duty to humanity by not making some pretty girl happy as Mrs. St. Helier.

But Mrs. O'Neill had no fancy for happiness which would entail putting a mistress over her.

Holding these views, she was not specially pleased to behold a whole bevy of young ladies flocking into the house on that famous "musical afternoon."

"And what could the masther be afther with that singing lady? He'd been out this mornin' again to see her. Was he goin' to marry her?" Such was the tenor of the thoughts which had been occupying the housekeeper's mind during her master's absence.

When he returned she placed his midday chop before him, and resolved to attack the subject which had been perplexing her all the morning.

"If you plaze, sur," she said, "have ye bin afther that furrin young lady to-day?"

"Yes, I have been finding a place for her to live in," said St. Helier, willing to indulge Mrs. O'Neill's well-known propensity for a little chat on "passing events."

"Might I be so bould," she resumed in an altered tone, which her master knew to be a sure sign of her displeasure, as well as the fact of her commencing her speech with an apology—"might I be so bould as to ask, sur, if ye're makin' up to her?"

Had anyone but Mrs. O'Neill made such an inquiry, St. Helier would have resented it, but she was privileged, and her question made him laugh. To teaze her he answered:

"Now don't you think she would make an excellent wife for me? I am getting old now, you know, Kitty."

"Ah! hould yer tongue with yer ouldness," cried the Hibernian hotly. "I hope it ain't a furriner as ye'll be afther marryin' when ye do begin——"

But whatever Kitty's views may have been, she was prevented from enlarging upon them, or further edifying her master, by that inexorable summons, the hall-bell.

"A letter, and to wait for an answer, sur," said Mrs. O'Neill politely, handing her master the epistle upon an artistic lacquer tray. St. Helier prided himself on the accurate details of his domestic establishment.

"What does the woman write to *me* for?" he exclaimed, as he tore open the note and read the following effusion from the un-English pen of Mrs. Braun:

"39, Great Grenfell Gardens, S.W.
"Tuesday.

"MUTCH RESPECKTED MR. ST. HELIER,

"Miss Theodosia, mine daughter, and I have consider your offering, and we will accept him. For the terms then, as we arrange this morning. The lady can go in her pretty room to-morrow, if she will.

"You will pardon that I mention it is mine rule for to pay the money in avance. And I hope you will not objeck to be a garantie for the strange lady, for sure you are her gardien, is it not? Ven you will bring the lady, we talk for all the rest.

"With a gracefull compliment, I am
"Your respecktfull,
"JOHANNA BRAUN."

"Confound it, this will never do," thought St. Helier, aghast at the contents of this semi-Teutonic epistle. "I must undeceive 'Mrs. Johanna Braun' at once."

He rose hastily, leaving his chop to get cold on his plate, to the great annoyance of the faithful Kitty, who felt convinced that the singing "furriner" was at the bottom of the fit of indigestion her master would be sure to suffer from, after such unwonted interruptions to the regularity of his meals and "all his ways."

Regardless of her entreaties to "ate a bit," St. Helier walked away into his library, where he sat down and wrote as follows:

"Little Grenfell Grove, S.W.

"Dear Madam,

"I hasten to disabuse your mind relative to my supposed guardianship of the Signorina Santarelli.

"That lady's father is an old friend of mine. His business necessitates his presence in Rome, just as the prospective career of the signorina necessitates her coming to London.

"My friend is a widower, and his means are limited. There was no choice possible to him, *à propos* of his daughter's journey to England. Aware of his dilemma, I offered to meet the signorina in Paris, where we both arrived last Saturday morning. I returned with the lady the same evening. I had further promised the signor to find a suitable home for his daughter, as she preferred her independence to being the guest of Mrs. Vivian, a lady who was acquainted with the signorina in Rome, and who had invited her to reside at her house in the Gardens.

"As to terms, etc., the signorina is quite able to arrange

these matters for herself, and will no doubt refer you to Messrs. C——, her father's bankers.

"I remain, Madam,

"Yours truly,

"EVERARD ST. HELIER."

"There, that's settled, and definitely, I hope," was St. Helier's mental comment as he returned to the dining-room, where the tender care of Mrs. O'Neill had already substituted a freshly grilled chop for the neglected morsel.

St. Helier, keenly appreciative of such kindly forethought, and the evident care bestowed on his comfort, thanked poor old Kitty with a smiling word, and feeling that he had satisfactorily solved a knotty point, enjoyed his luncheon, and his pint of Beaune, with renewed zest. Presently he settled himself in the easiest chair his library contained, for an afternoon of undisturbed and peaceful enjoyment with a favourite author. He had been considerably ruffled by the occurrences of the morning, and therefore doubly appreciated the tranquil comfort of the solitary afternoon.

But soon after three o'clock the pealing of the hall-bell startled him again, and presently Mrs. O'Neill announced Mr. Norman."

"Ah! how do you do? delighted to see you," said St. Helier cordially, as he advanced to meet his visitor.

But Mr. Norman was stiff and unresponsive.

"Pardon me, Mr. St. Helier;" here Mr. Norman coughed, and evidently was at a loss how to proceed, for

hum and ah! and eh! seemed inefficient sounds for the commencement of a conversation.

Still they led him on to his next somewhat startling announcement: "I have come to you as a father."

"God bless me! what does he mean?" wondered St. Helier, and drew himself up rather stiffly too, as he realised that his visitor was not bound on a pleasant mission.

"As a father," repeated Mr. Norman with renewed emphasis.

"I regret that I cannot enter into your feelings there, never having been one," said St. Helier, who was growing irritated, but strove to hide his vexation by a forced laugh.

"I am not here to joke," said Mr. Norman sternly, though inwardly thankful to have extricated himself from the difficulties which the word "father" had brought him to. "I consider, Mr. St. Helier, that you owe me an explanation."

"An explanation of what, pray?" cried St. Helier promptly, and added: "I am not aware that I have said or done anything to necessitate your demanding such of me."

"You invited my daughters to your house, to meet a young lady about whom we know nothing, except that she occupies the doubtful position of being under your protection, and I must say that I consider you were wanting in—in respect towards me, when you invited my daughters to meet a person——" Mr. Norman was flushed and spoke with rising wrath, in proportion to the extent his grievance assumed, as he recounted it.

St. Helier, on the contrary, was excessively calm and self-contained, though lividly pale.

When Mr. Norman used the obnoxious term "person,' St. Helier stopped him with uplifted hand. "Excuse me," he said, "if I request you to pause before you allow yourself to say another word of a detrimental character of my friend the Signorina Santarelli, who has been specially recommended to my care by her father, a widower. He has been my very good friend for the last fifteen years. At his request I undertook the charge of his daughter, so far that I promised to find a suitable home for her, and to procure her such introductions as will be necessary to facilitate her views of becoming a singer in London."

"Exactly so," said Mr. Norman testily, "and I don't think you paid me any compliment, sir, when you selected my daughters as associates for a young lady who has evidently come to England like other adventurous foreigners, to see what can be got out of it." This was a familiar grievance of Mr. Norman's, as has been stated before, and he tackled it con amore, or rather con vigore.

"I assure you I meant it as the highest compliment I could pay your daughters, Mr. Norman," said St. Helier, who was considerably perplexed by the other's vehemence. "I admire them so sincerely, that I felt the best service I could do my friend's daughter would be to introduce her to them, and I am sure you saw nothing objectionable in the girl herself."

"No," said Mr. Norman, cooling as he realised the other's unreserved frankness, "indeed, I have nothing to

urge against the lady, who appears all that is excellent ; but you must be aware, Mr. St. Helier, that a young lady exposes herself to misinterpretation when she accepts the protection of a gentleman who is not a relative, who meets her in Paris, travels with her, and, once in London, drives about with her, makes arrangements for her, and, in fact, may be anything to her from the position he appears to assume."

The truth of these remarks came home to Mr. St. Helier, and gave them the power to sting.

With angry resentment he replied: "I allow no one to question my private affairs, or course of action. As you object to your daughters having met and formed an acquaintance with the Signorina Santarelli, I am sorry. In future I would suggest that your objections should be extended to myself also—since I am the real delinquent."

"By no means!" cried Mr. Norman hastily. He did not wish or intend to have a rupture with St. Helier.

But that gentleman was sore, and angry too, now. He felt that he had placed himself in an awkward position, and bitterly resented the bruise he had received in consequence.

In his pride, which would brook no interference, he determined to cast these consequences aside.

"I have no desire to alter our friendly intercourse, I assure you," continued Mr. Norman amicably; for his wrath, which was not deep, had all evaporated by this time; "but my daughters are motherless, and my anxiety on their account is therefore doubled. My second girl is

already too romantically inclined, and I do not wish her to associate with people who may give latitude to her views."

Poor little Estella! When her father spoke of her, it went hard with St. Helier to persist in his determination to withdraw from all acquaintance with her family, for Estella interested him far more than he dared to allow, even to himself. He thought, on one or two occasions, that he had noticed certain signs which, had he been more vain or sanguine, he might have construed into mute avowals of something very like preference for himself."

Still a man seldom forgives an imputation cast upon his *savoir faire*, and the very fact of certain vague misgivings on his own part made him all the more firm in contending that his course had been the right one throughout.

"I regret," he said coldly, "that I should have been guilty of what you deem an injustice to your daughters, Mr. Norman, and but trust that you will consider the error repaired by all intercourse ceasing between us for the future."

He rose from his chair as he spoke, and thus obliged Mr. Norman to do the same. Both felt that the interview was at an end.

"No doubt that is the better course," replied Mr. Norman, in an equally frosty manner.

And so the two men parted, both secretly sorry that they had let their pride get the better of their discretion, both realising that they had lost something.

"I daresay the girl is right enough," thought Mr. Norman, as he walked home full of misgivings as to how

he should account to his girls for the coolness between St. Helier and himself.

But he was consoled by the reflection that if St. Helier meant to marry Hilda, as seemed probable enough now, it would be as well for his girls not to grow too fond of the barrister. He half suspected that his romantic Estella was that way inclined already; if so, the break was better now than later on.

CHAPTER XI.

A LITTLE SPECULATION.

BEFORE Mr. Norman had put his latch-key into the door of No. 40, he had resolved to keep his own counsel as regarded his interview with Mr. St. Helier, and its deplorable results.

He had come to the conclusion that discretion, or rather silence, would be the best policy on his part, until some opportunity occurred which would necessitate his broaching the disagreeable subject to his daughters.

Estella and Nettie rejoiced when they found that their father had apparently no intention of further reproving them for that clandestine visit of Hilda's.

During the signorina's interview with Estella, she had so captivated that romantic young person that it would indeed have been a bitter blow to her had Mr. Norman tabooed their future intercourse.

Estella was now looking forward with the greatest im-

patience to the day that would see Hilda fairly installed as an inmate of No. 39, and thus constitute her one of the Grenfellians, whom, with few exceptions, the Normans looked upon as a vast family circle.

Mary, having heard the report of both her sisters, on her return from Bayswater deemed it advisable to call upon Mrs. Braun herself, to ascertain further particulars regarding the signorina.

Mary chose an opportune moment for her visit, for St. Helier's letter to Mrs. Braun arrived with her, and the old lady, who was evidently much impressed by the sisterly anxieties which her visitor confided to her, lent Mary the satisfactory letter to show to Mr. Norman.

He listened to his daughter's account of the signorina with silent attention, and then read St. Helier's letter without a word of comment. Secretly, however, he was congratulating himself on his previous reticence.

"Since Mrs. and Miss Braun have undertaken the surveillance of the signorina, there can be no further objection to our girls meeting her," he said indifferently; and, after a moment's reflection, added, "you must guard them against too close an intimacy with the foreigner, Mary; for Estella, especially, such companionship is not desirable."

Mary felt very much inclined to ask a leading question *à propos* of St. Helier, but she, like her father, had proved that reticence is often synonymous with discretion.

"I called upon Mrs. Vivian, as you wished me to do, father," she informed him.

"I am glad of that," said he.

"She received me most amicably," continued Mary, "and has asked me to bring the girls round on Monday afternoon to take tea with her; and I have promised to do so. Her account of the signorina was eminently satisfactory also. She has but one fault to find with her, and that is her 'proud reserve.'"

"Ah!" remarked Mr. Norman, and hastily changed the subject, which was becoming irksome to him, by inquiring how the Shoddy-Princess had furnished her house.

"Magnificence and lavish display are too feeble to express the overwhelming gorgeousness of her furniture and the style of decoration," said Mary laughing, as she adopted Nettie's superlatives. "I feel that my powers of description are not equal to the wonders of Mrs. Vivian's establishment," she added; "Nettie will do them justice on Monday. You don't mind the girls going there with me, do you, father?"

"Not in the least," said he, and hastened to leave the room, and thus to avoid the necessity of any further explanation.

He walked out through the open window into the Gardens, and again congratulated himself on the easy manner in which he had managed this difficult affair. As for its possible consequences, he consoled himself with the thought that Time, the universal healer, would soon mend the slight rupture between St. Helier and himself—which, after all, was but skin deep.

On the following Saturday afternoon, the Honble. Mrs. Toegoode called upon Miss Norman. Finding Mary in the drawing-room, the visitor apologised, and asked if she might see *Estella*, for whom she had a special message from the countess dowager.

"I quite thought *you* were Miss Norman, my dear," said the authoress, embracing her "dear young friend" with effusion.

Her pretended ignorance of the existence of an *elder* daughter, made the task Adela-ida had set herself less difficult.

She had obtained one card from "the dear Dow," for the At-Home on the 16th, and that hospitable peeress had warned "Addie" that she would be permitted to introduce one friend only on that occasion, instead of the proverbial half-dozen, who usually strutted or fluttered in her wake.

Sweet tempered Addie took this caution very good-naturedly, and instead of in any sense resenting it, at once said: "I promise you I'll make the very best use of the one card, my dear Dow, by giving it to one of the prettiest and nicest girls you have ever seen."

That girl was Estella Norman, for whom Adela-ida had conceived one of her sudden and gushing "friendships," and whom she had resolved to chaperon to the great At-Home herself. As for the signorina, poor Addie's economical intentions in regard to that musical lady had been forestalled, for Mrs. Vivian had already called upon Hilda with a card from the countess. How that card came into Mrs. Vivian's hands must be explained.

On the occasion of their first meeting, Peregrine Latimer had been much impressed by the magnificent toilet and arrogant bearing of the Shoddy-Princess.

Well versed in the study of human nature, Latimer had no trouble in making a mental diagnosis of the American, and very soon discovered the direct route to Mrs. Vivian's favour, which he was anxious to obtain.

Acting on his conclusions, he baited a trap for the ambitious American, and elected to be present at the moment in which she would be likely to make her first nibble.

Latimer's method of toasting the cheese was to induce the countess dowager to call upon the Shoddy-Princess, whom he described as such to her eccentric ladyship.

The countess was undoubtedly "peculiar" in her ways, her likes, and her dislikes, but she was thoroughly consistent.

She preferred her younger delicate and thriftless son, the Honourable Benjamin Raynewater, to the sedate, pedantic, and eminently "correct" first-born, the present earl, who was too much of a "prig" in manner and politics to suit the advanced liberal views of her ladyship.

The Honourable Benjamin, a feckless consumptive youth, had some years ago been sent out to Melbourne for the sake of the voyage.

He arrived at the Australian port lonely and wretched, mentally and physically in a despondent condition.

Thus Latimer, the prosperous sheep-farmer, had discovered the youth, to whom he showed great kindness and every possible attention.

Young Benjamin, feeling himself in temporary exile, though not absolutely outlawed, formed a strong attachment for Peregrine Latimer, and when that gentleman was "homeward bound," he brought urgent letters of recommendation from the Honourable Mr. Raynewater to his fond mamma, which insured the ex-Colonial a cordial welcome from her ladyship, who soon grew personally attached to the merry silver-haired giant. At first she liked him for the sake of her absent Benjamin, but very soon on his own account.

He was so worldly-wise, so amusing, had such a fund of anecdote, and such wonderful powers of resource.

Latimer thoroughly understood the weird machinations of the Stock Exchange too, and had a peculiar facility in the manipulation of money. Twice already had he converted a five-pound note into twenty golden sovereigns for her ladyship, who enjoyed these little gambling transactions much as she did every other proceeding that might be considered "irregular."

She knew Latimer managed this *coup* for her by his clever mode of investment, though he modestly called it "a ready-money trick," and how he laughed as he said so! The countess, secretly pocketing her sovereigns, felt herself entitled to laugh heartily too. She knew she could trust Latimer, and that these little speculations of hers would not be spoken of to any outsider.

Such cleverness, combined with discretion, had soon raised the Australian immensely in her ladyship's esteem. He was perfectly aware now that she was both ready and

willing to serve him, if this should be in her power. When he, therefore, requested the countess to oblige him by leaving her card at the house of her new neighbour, Mrs. Vivian, he felt assured of her ladyship's consent.

Indeed, he gained that and the three At-Home cards he specially desired for the 16th, without any difficulty. Two were required for Mrs. Vivian and Ronald, and one for that wonderful singer in whom Mr. St. Helier appeared to take so great an interest.

And how about poor Theodosia? Was Mr. Latimer ignorant of the intense desire agitating that gentle maiden to be present at the great At-Home?

If so, it was cruel of him not to exert himself a little on behalf of a lady so manifestly devoted to him. A word from him at this time would have obtained the open-sesame card with which poor Dosie might have stepped into the drawing-room of a countess, which presented the idea of elysium to her untutored ambition.

And yet that word was never spoken by the man on whom she had lately lavished such care, comfort, and attention as he would scarcely have received had he been the master of No. 39, instead of simply a "guest," and a guest on whom Mrs. Braun was beginning to look with less favour, since there was a considerable balance on her books against this special favourite of Dosie's.

The spinster had most earnestly implored her mother on no account to importune him for such a trifle.

"He knows my rules, he knows my terms, and he should keep it," said Mrs. Braun crossly. "Nothing

gives me so much vexation as any unpunctuality in the payment."

"Promise you won't ask him until after the 16th, dear mamma," pleaded Theodosia, clinging to a forlorn hope.

"It will make no matter to him, mine child, or to me," said the old lady, touched by the gentleness of Theodosia's look and tone; "but I will give him till the 20th, as you wish it."

Mr. Latimer felt that he had been directly instrumental in launching Mrs. Vivian on the smooth surface of London society, or what the credulous American construed as such, since he had obtained the promise of the countess to call upon her neighbour.

"Provided you don't inveigle me into going when La Shoddy is at home," was her ladyship's condition, and this Latimer promised to arrange satisfactorily.

He was now a constant and an ever-welcome visitor at the startlingly-magnificent residence over which the Shoddy-Princess reigned with such conscious pride, asking for and accepting the manifold suggestions of her new ally and adviser as to improvements in the style and decoration of her mansion with complimentary alacrity. He accompanied her on shopping expeditions too, and under his direction she selected and purchased Japanese curios and European china to an extent that fairly amazed the shopkeeper, although the visit of the wealthy American had been previously announced to him by Mr. Latimer, who may have had some personal, though private, interest in these lavish purchases, beyond the gratification of seeing the "princess" squandering her money.

It was on their return from one of the most extensive and protracted of these shopping expeditions that Mrs. Vivian found the card of the countess dowager awaiting her, and soon overcoming the momentary regret at her absence from home, said she thoroughly appreciated the fact that her ladyship had chosen to come round in the morning, which was truly neighbourly and informal.

Latimer quite agreed with Mrs. Vivian, and willingly accepted her cordial invitation to stay and share her belated luncheon.

"Ronald has gone to Cambridge to look up some friends of his," she explained, as she and her guest sat down to table. "He is not much pleasure or comfort to me, that son of mine," she added. "He has a craze for what he calls 'artistic studies,' and there's just nothing practical or commercial in his constitution; perhaps that's the reason he and I don't get along first-rate together."

Mother and son certainly were somewhat unsympathetic, but wisely agreed to differ amicably, each one going his or her way, without in the least interfering with the other.

In Rome they had occasionally come into violent collision, in regard to Ronald's perverse admiration for the Signorina Santarelli; but then his mother, seeing that he suffered acutely, had ignored her personal objections, and come to his aid.

Her mediation was not successful. Still Ronald had appreciated her good intentions, and now resigned himself by tacitly acquiescing in his mother's novel pastime of laying siege to the higher circles of London society. So

she went on in her ambitious career unchecked, and Ronald was left to his pursuits unhindered also.

Mr. Latimer rejoiced to find that the luncheon was to be *en tête-à-tête*, and exerted himself throughout the meal to entertain and please his voluble hostess.

"We will take our coffee in my boudoir," said Mrs. Vivian, rising and leading the way to that treasure-house of ormolu, lacquer, Persian rugs, and gold-embroidered satins.

"These everlasting advertisements will send me crazy one day, I guess," she said, lifting up a handful of open-ended missives, which the book-post had brought her that morning.

Latimer raised his eyebrows inquiringly, and thrust his right hand into the breast-pocket of his coat, as he settled himself in an attitude of attention. He leant back in the comfortable spring-backed armchair which Mrs. Vivian had indicated to him as surprisingly "cunning."

"Can I be of any assistance, Mrs. Vivian?" he asked with an encouraging smile.

"Wal, I don't exactly know," said she. "You see, the fact is that people have found out I've got some money, and it seems as if they couldn't allow me to get rid of it in my own way, for the hundreds of circulars I get about paid-up capital, insurances, and stocks and shares would puzzle the brains of a City man, I'm sure; so you'll guess what they do for me."

"Can I be of assistance to you in any way?" repeated Latimer eagerly.

"Indeed you can," she replied; "for the fact is I have

a sum at my disposal just now, the proceeds of some houses just sold for me in New York, and I want to put a part of the money out at a profitable rate of interest."

Latimer's hand was thrust still farther into that capacious breast-pocket, but he did not speak as yet.

Mrs. Vivian went back to her writing-table, and took up a pamphlet she had reserved when she threw the others aside.

"This came to me this morning," she said; "but it's not so foolish as the rest, and I confess it has taken my fancy, for it's real cunning."

Seating herself by Mr. Latimer's side, she offered it to him.

"This is most extraordinary," he exclaimed, with his genial laugh, and at this moment drew forth a similar pamphlet from that mysterious pocket of his. "*I* believe in this, Mrs. Vivian," he said, in his tone of conviction; "and I have just been elected Honorary Secretary to the Great Anti-Bee Company."

"How wonderful!" she cried, delighted as she heard this announcement. "I liked this project better than any I've heard of as yet; indeed, I took to it from the moment I read the prospectus through. It's so natural, and so useful, and is sure to be taken up by the million. It's the very notion to find favour in America; and we do know how to make money in the States, don't we, now?"

"Indeed, yes," said Latimer pleasantly.

"You make your millions there as easily as our Company will make honey for the millions here."

"That's so," cried Mrs. Vivian, clapping her bejewelled hands; "and what a mercy to do away with those buzzing bees and their troublesome stings. For my part I've just a real craze for honey, and I'd like to join any scheme which will bring a good supply of the article on to the breakfast-table of either Britishers or Yankees."

"I agree with you entirely, Mrs. Vivian," cried Latimer cordially; "and in promising my unflagging energy and my steady support to this Company, I feel that it is not only as a good investment for some spare cash of mine that I am exerting myself, but because I can thus prove myself what I aspire to be, a philanthropist in the highest sense of the word. What could be better for the moral elevation of the species than the constant supply of sweet nutriment to the body, the sensitive home of the soul?" Mr. Latimer shook his "noble" head meditatively, and tossed his silvery locks from his face with the graceful movement which Theodosia so much admired.

Mrs. Vivian smiled by way of response to her adviser's fine sentiments, but these had really been considerably beyond her comprehension, and she eagerly took advantage of his meditative pause to return to the more practical part of their discussion by making minute inquiries into the number of shares, the liability of their holders, and the aggregate capital of the Great Anti-Bee Company, which undertook to supply honey to the million at 3d. per lb.

Mr. Latimer, who could be the most matter-of-fact and business-like of men, whenever commercial interests were involved, immediately abandoned the discourse on philan-

thropy, in which he had allowed himself to indulge, and surprised and delighted his attentive listener by the precision of detail with which he now elaborated the great Anti-Bee scheme, proving to her, in self-asserting figures, that an investment in ten shares, at £100 each, must give her *at least* thirty per cent. interest for her money, besides leaving the shares, *i.e.* the actual property, in her own hands, to be disposed of at more tempting premiums after a time, or certainly to enable her at any moment to recover her original outlay.

Mrs. Vivian, who prided herself on her knowledge of figures and on her genius for speculation, followed the intricacies of the arithmetical puzzle Mr. Latimer was elaborating for her with growing interest.

When she felt she had thoroughly grasped the comprehensive view of enormous profits opening before her dazzled eyes, she turned them upon Mr. Latimer, and gravely confronting him, said:

"Then I may understand that, as a friend, you would advise me to invest the sum I spoke of in this scheme rather than in any other you know of?"

"Most emphatically *yes*," said Mr. Latimer, bringing his clenched fist so heavily down upon the frail ebony table on which the pamphlets, the arithmetical diagnosis, and the inkstand were resting, that it seemed to shudder under his emphatic blow.

"And what is the sum you would like to invest with us, Mrs. Vivian?" he asked; and it was now his turn to confront the Shoddy-Princess, whose glance he met with intense interest in his.

"Two thousand pounds!" she answered; "that is the sum I shall receive from New York on the 15th."

"The day before the great At-Home?" suggested Latimer.

"Yes," said she slowly, and a look of vexation contracted her brow as she added: "I really had set my heart on going there; but suppose there's no possibility now, since the Hon. Mrs. Toegoode has not kept faith with me? I did reckon on her, and I showed her a heap of attention in Paris——"

The American spoke almost plaintively.

"I imagined you would like to be present at the countess's reception," said Latimer, smiling blandly, "so I endeavoured to forestall your wishes."

As he spoke he drew forth the invitation-cards from his pocketbook, and handed them to the delighted lady.

"Now, this is real good of you, Mr. Latimer," she cried, and he felt that he had indeed baited his trap successfully.

"You really desire me to secure you shares to the amount of two thousand pounds?" he asked, as she was fingering the large pasteboards which were to open the doors of "real high life" to her.

"Most certainly, if you will be so good," said she. "If you will call on the morning of the 15th, I can either hand the money to you here, or we can proceed to the offices of the Company together."

"I will not fail you," he replied promptly, and after a pause, added: "I would make a suggestion to you which

you may like to adopt. I have obtained another card from the countess for the Signorina Santarelli, whom I named as *your* friend."

Mrs. Vivian's face betrayed displeasure.

"For a good reason, of course," said Latimer quickly. "The countess loves music, and adores operatic singing; but her ladyship does not care to pay £20 for the pleasure of one scena, when she can hear a whole opera from her stall for a guinea. Therefore, I mentioned the signorina as *your* friend. If you chaperon her, and then request her to sing, the countess will thoroughly appreciate the favour *you* are doing her, do you see?"

"Indeed, and I do!" replied the American, radiant smiles having cleared all the threatening frowns away; "and I do think, of all the clever cunning men I ever met, you're the most so."

Latimer bowed gratefully, although he did not quite approve of the second adjective in Mrs. Vivian's complimentary phrase; but then she was not English, and gave a strange meaning to some words.

"*I* am fully convinced that you will not regret your proposed investment in the Anti-Bee Company," he said presently; "still it might be more satisfactory to you first to consult your lawyer on the advisability of connecting yourself with an enterprise which is still in its infancy?"

"I hate lawyers," cried Mrs. Vivian flushing, "and if they were known by the name they deserve, they would all be called thieves!"

"My dear madam!" cried Latimer, aghast at this un-

English vehemence, but added in a very gentle tone: "Although I am obliged to protest against your harsh judgment on the legal profession, I cannot but feel gratified by the fact of your trusting me without first consulting a solicitor. For my part, I have no cause to be grateful to them as a class either."

"I hate the whole lot!" cried Mrs. Vivian; "I never will go through the absurd form of consulting men whom I distrust as rascals. Now, don't you look horrified, Mr. Latimer; you know their dirty ways as well as I do."

Latimer shot a curious look at her flushed face from under his heavy brows, then tossed his silvery locks away with a jerk, and blandly smiled as she continued:

"I've got my father's money and plenty of it, for he once 'struck ile.' I was his only child, and his fortune was left me in my own right, and with it some of his fine business capacity too. He never trusted the carnying lawyers in his time, and so he kept his innings pretty tight, and I mean to walk in his footsteps. I'm my own legal adviser, and instead of permitting any cheating lawyer, either a Britisher or an American, to help himself to my dollars, I intend to make a few thousands on my own account. You said as true a thing to Mr. Norman the other day as I ever heard. 'Money begets money,' were your words, and I'll prove the wisdom of your remark before I'm a year older."

"The Misses Norman are in the drawing-room, madam," announced the footman, opening the door of the boudoir.

CHAPTER XII.

LATIMER TO THE RESCUE.

"I WILL be with them directly," said Mrs. Vivian rising, and turning to Mr. Latimer she added: "You will stay and take some tea with us, will you not?"

Latimer, whose spirits were more than usually exuberant this afternoon, assented with alacrity, and offering his arm to the American with that profuse show of gallantry which she so much admired as indicative of "polish," was conducted to the drawing-room, where the Misses Norman were waiting.

"My darling girls, I am delighted indeed," cried Mrs. Vivian, imitating the effusive style of a certain titled lady whom she had met and admired at a distance in Rome; a lady who assumed airs of intense admiration and affection for girls in general, and who always addressed her particular favourites as "my darling girl, or girls," as the case might be. Determined to copy her aristocratic model accurately, the Shoddy-Princess now approached the Norman girls with extended arms, and, to their manifest surprise, kissed each in turn on either cheek, and loudly congratulated them on their charming appearance. "Only my dear Miss Estella looks a little delicate," she said, and added insinuatingly: "Too much gaiety, night vigils, late hours, my child? Indeed this must not be. Looks are of such infinite importance to young ladies, don't you know?"

"Your brilliant sister certainly does not seem as ani-

mated as usual, Miss Nettie," whispered Mr. Latimer, laying his large hand paternally on Nettie's shoulder.

Nettie shrank from his touch as though it scorched her. "I do so hate being pawed by anybody," she afterwards explained to Mary, who had noticed this abrupt movement on the Baby's part.

Quite aware of the astonishment with which Mr. Latimer regarded her, she replied to his remark with unusual civility.

"It's not gaiety that makes Estella look so pale and worn," she said also in a whisper; "it's *work*. You can't imagine how she devotes herself to her writing." Seeing a look of inquiring interest in Mr. Latimer's keen brown eyes, Nettie, warming to her subject, unfolded the mystery of the growing MS., and dwelt on the wondrous attractions of "Gwendolen" and "Reginald," who had already proceeded on their chequered career so far as the middle of the second volume.

After the girls had partaken of tea, during which there had been much animated and desultory chat, of which the dowager's approaching *soirée* formed the leading topic, Mr. Latimer found an opportunity to say to Estella:

"A little bird has whispered to me that you are writing a novel. Now, any work inspired by such evident talent as yours, and written by your fair hands under the guidance of your beautiful eyes *must* be admirable, of that I am convinced."

"Really, Mr. Latimer, I don't know what reason you can have for such a conclusion," said Estella nervously, and

flushed by that tell-tale colour of hers, which always bore witness to every unusual emotion on her part.

"Ah! but I have a reason, and a very good one," said Latimer, and his eyes seemed to corroborate his statement by their overt glance of admiration.

Estella was young, romantic, ambitious, perhaps a little *exaltée*, certainly she loved admiration, and praise always encouraged her.

Of late she had received scant tribute to her undeniable charms, and her talents were languishing for want of the stimulant of encouraging words; therefore she listened to Mr. Latimer in astonishment at first, and then with an undeniable feeling of gratification.

He at least appreciated her, and though she had not liked him hitherto, she had always considered him clever. It is most delightful to be appreciated, thought poor Estella, and with a sudden revulsion of feeling she wished this admiration could have come to her from another. But, alas! that other had neither admiration nor interest for her. His thoughts were concentrated on Hilda, whose charming manner and glorious voice had entranced him.——

"If you are thinking of publishing your book, Miss Estella," said Mr. Latimer, suddenly breaking in upon her day-dreams, "I think I can materially assist you."

"*Really?*" cried Estella, brightening as she had not done for many days past.

"Really," answered Latimer decisively. "I will tell you how to set about it in the Gardens presently."

"We shall be there all the evening," said Estella, "and,

oh! I thank you so much, Mr. Latimer." Then, seeing that her sisters had risen, Estella went to her hostess, thanked her for "such a pleasant afternoon," and bid her good-bye.

What was Mr. Latimer going to say to her in the Gardens? she wondered. He really spoke as though Gwendolen, her brain's most precious firstborn, were soon to see the light in print. No wonder she "walked on air," as Nettie declared, laughing gaily, and added: "What a humbug you are, Stella. How could you thank Mrs. Vivian for *such* a pleasant afternoon, when there was no Ronald and no Mr. St. Helier, and not even 'a musical friend' to enliven our dulness?"

"I found Mr. Latimer very entertaining to-day," said Estella warmly, "and you and Mary played your overture charmingly."

"Praise from Sir—what d'ye call him?—is praise indeed," cried Nettie; "and now let us make a rush to be up at the tennis-net first." So saying, she laughingly bounded across the Gardens, followed more sedately by her elder sisters. They were in no particular hurry, neither croquet nor the far more enticing lawn-tennis offered any special attraction to them.

Mary, after her promise to Mr. Latimer at that oft-remembered and constantly-quoted first dinner-party, had felt herself compelled to make an effort at lawn-tennis, but her very mild attempts at "hitting" exposed her to so much fault-finding and derision, that she very soon desisted from a game which necessitated far more romping than she considered becoming in any but very young girls.

Mary was by nature somewhat formal in manner, speech, and appearance, and any violent exertion did not appear to her to coincide with her notions of what was ladylike.

Estella enjoyed a gâme now and then, but this evening she was far too much pre-occupied by her anticipation of what Mr. Latimer might have to say to her, to undertake any more active occupation than sitting and waiting expectantly for him.

Jonathan was already at his post, and he and Nettie together had very speedily organised the two contending factions at the tennis-nets, and were soon themselves entirely absorbed by the game.

Mary, catching sight of Mrs. Braun, who was just entering the Gardens from No. 39, went to meet the old lady, with whom she always greatly enjoyed a chat, and who to-day would no doubt have plenty to tell concerning her new boarder, who, as Mary believed, had taken up her residence at No. 39 some days previously.

"Yes, the signorina is quite at home with us already," said Mrs. Braun in answer to Mary's inquiries, "and very happy indeed she does make herself. Her voice, it is the most beautifullest I have ever heard, and with all that talent she has no vanity, no conceitedness, but is just as goot and as true and as innocent as a harmless calf, of who she has the loving eyes."

Mrs. Braun's tenderly sympathetic tone made up for the lack of eloquence in her somewhat dubious description of Hilda's charms.

"I am glad you find the young lady such an acquisition

to your circle," said Mary. "Is she not coming into the Gardens this evening?"

"I make her promise to rejoin me in one hour," replied Mrs. Braun. "She is a goot daughter, and she is now writing to her father a very long letter of all the news that is happen to her in this last week."

"You really should not have gone out and left the signorina alone in the house, just as Mr. Latimer came home, mamma," said Theodosia, suddenly appearing before her startled mother, and speaking in her harshest and most reproachful tones.

Mary glanced from the angry daughter to her perplexed parent with a strong feeling of indignation rising in her mind against the former.

"You need not be anxious, dear Mrs. Braun," she said reassuringly, as the old lady was preparing to return indoors, and thus pacify her cross Dosie; "and pray don't think of moving, for Mr. Latimer has just come in by the little gate, and is sitting talking to my sister at the farther end of the Gardens."

"He was shut up away in his study, and the signorina was writing in her own room, so I could tink it no great harm to come out for a liddel fresh air myself den," the old lady said apologetically.

"You were quite right, dear Mrs. Braun," repeated Mary emphatically, and added: "I am quite sure your daughter agrees with me, and is pleased to see you enjoying a rest out-of-doors."

"Oh! I don't care one way or the other," retorted Theodosia, still speaking snappishly. She was watching

Estella's pleased reception of Mr. Latimer in momentarily rising wrath.

"I really think that the only way to keep girls within the bounds of decorum in these wicked days would be to lock them up altogether. It seems as if no man is safe from their attentions now that they run about unchaperoned in all directions."

"You vill not that I lock you up, mine Dosie?" asked her mother, smiling kindly at what she thought her daughter meant as a joke.

"Oh dear no!" cried Dosie, tossing her head. "I have too much self-respect, thank heaven! ever to expose myself to the too marked attentions of any gentleman."

Mary devoutly wished that Nettie had been near enough to hear this fervid declaration, and could quite imagine the alacrity with which the mischievous Baby would mimic Theodosia's most uncalled-for exculpation.

"I have been thinking over that little matter we were speaking about, very attentively, Miss Estella," said Latimer, comfortably taking a seat on the bench the authoress was occupying. "The first desideratum for you is permission to go to the countess's next At-Home. If you can obtain your father's sanction, and will be present on the 16th, I will make sure that Mr. Snereton shall be there to meet you. He is the editor of "The Lyre," you know, and publishes a Reader—*i.e.* a serial novel, in the columns of his journal.

"He is very enterprising and prides himself on patronising novelty of all kinds. If he meets you in society he cannot fail to be charmed with you—*cela va sans dire*; so

pray don't deny the soft impeachment. And then, as he is a very devoted admirer of *le beaux sexe*, the chances are that he will at once make some arrangements with you about your story."

Estella listened with ever-growing interest to thisromantic and novel account of the mode of procedure adopted by Mr. Latimer's editorial friend.

How very very far this gentle version was from the hard truth the poor girl had not the remotest idea.

She had heard something of the difficulties aspiring authors occasionally meet with, and had even read not long before a heart-rending account of the weary pilgrimages, the sickening disappointments, the repeated and sometimes cruel refusals given to work which, in spite of denial and discouragement, had yet ultimately found its way into print, and been triumphantly received by an exultant and discriminating public. The brilliant finale of this tragedy of authorship had made a far deeper impression on Estella than the depressing tale of woe, the fiery ordeal of rebuffs, and dejection, and hungry despondency. Those were harrowing details written in that life's history only to work upon the reader's sympathetic feelings, and to prepare him, or rather her (Estella's notion of the genus "reader" was strictly feminine at this time), for the glorious reaction of the concluding chapters in which virtue was triumphant, modest industry rewarded, and the literary heroine promoted to the first rank among the authors of the day.

How much simpler and more inviting Mr. Latimer's account sounded.

Estella's young ambition found the notion of going, seeing, and conquering, very congenial, and resolved that this should be the course she would pursue on the night of the 16th. *Coûte que coûte* she must be present at the dowager's At-Home. On that she was fully resolved.

Having arrived at this decision, she imparted it to Mr. Latimer.

"Quite right," said he; "no end of literary folks, swells, and others, will go to the dowager's. Her ladyship's house is a recognised rendezvous for talent and eccentricity of all kinds. Very often the two go together."

"How intensely I shall enjoy all that," said Estella eagerly; "I feel as if I could scarcely await the coming of that happy day."

"Ah Miss Estella!" cried Latimer, having attentively watched the varying expressions of her bright face, "I only wish *I* had the chance of turning publisher for your sake, we'd make a colossal fortune together, I'm quite sure of that. You would write all the stories, and I should bring the whole strength of my commercial experience to bear on the most effective launching of them. That would turn out well, wouldn't it now?"

"You know best, Mr. Latimer," said Estella modestly, and added: "I'm sure, if you would promise to accept "Gwendolen," I heartily wish you would turn publisher or editor, or whatever the correct title may be."

"In any case, allow me most earnestly to wish you every possible success, my dear young lady," he said; and,

possessing himself of her hand, he pressed it heartily by way of encouragement.

Theodosia saw this friendly (?) demonstration, put her own construction upon it, and wished she was a *man* that she might swear.——

Nettie, whose attention had wandered from the game for some time past, had been considerably puzzled and interested by the evidently absorbing conversation which was so entirely engrossing her sister.

The Baby's interest, however, changed into absolute dismay when she caught sight of Mr. St. Helier, who had entered the Gardens from the Grove gate, and very leisurely sauntered close up to where Estella and Mr. Latimer were indefinitely prolonging that strangely confidential conversation.

Nettie saw them putting their heads together, and noting with angry impatience that both were far too much absorbed in each other to perceive Mr. St. Helier, who took up his position at a little distance from, and at the back of, the seat occupied by that deeply-engrossed couple.

For a moment Nettie felt tempted to bid Jonathan go and whisper the news of St. Helier's vicinity into her sister's ear. But a sudden remembrance of the lamentable failure of her last attempt at diplomatic combination checked the Baby, who feared that Johnny's awkwardness might cause Estella considerable embarrassment.

Oh! why would Stella keep staring straight into Mr. Latimer's great goggle eyes, when the man she *adored* was

impatiently waiting for a glance from her, and evidently suffering under her cruel indifference?

These were poor Nettie's agitated thoughts as she, helpless herself (because she dared not stir from her post at this critical moment), watched the mischief going on within a few yards of her.

She felt as if she could willingly have taken Estella by the shoulders and shaken her into instant appreciation of the danger of her position.

Meanwhile Miss Braun, who now occasionally joined the tennis-players, had elected to do so on this occasion, probably with a view to remaining at a reasonable distance from Mr. Latimer without being palpably engaged in watching her hero.

Theodosia's presence in the opposition party made it the more imperative on Nettie not to quit the field of battle for an instant, more especially as Miss Braun's raging jealousy seemed to endow her with a novel degree of power, and was transforming her into quite a furious opponent.

Even this formidable adversary, however, was presently forgotten by Nettie, who soon became so intensely absorbed by the sentimental game those other three were all unconsciously playing before her anxious eyes, that she rushed for the ball which Theodosia had just served her, and which *must*, if left alone, have "fallen out of court." She struck it, but, alas! it grazed the net, and fell back into *her* court.

"Are you mad, Nettie, going for a ball which must have been out?" shouted Jonathan, roused to something very

like anger himself by this gross carelessness on the part of his usually most skilful partner.

"I am very very sorry, for your sake, Johnny," said Nettie, with touching humility, "and I'll promise to do better another time." The poor child really was both angry and ashamed at the want of attention which would give Theodosia's party the game.

And yet she felt inclined to rejoice that now, at all events, she would be free, free to rush over to her unconscious sister and warn her of St. Helier's presence.

But alas! even as she began to move, she saw Mr. Latimer possess himself of Estella's hand and retain it, saw Theodosia stamp her foot so violently that the grass was crushed under it, and saw St. Helier turn sharply, walk straight away to the gate of the Gardens, out of them, and without so much as once looking over his shoulder, right up the incline of the Grove, where, of course, he disappeared from her view.

CHAPTER XIII.

ELATION.

"OH Stella, Stella! what have you been talking to Mr. Latimer about in that awfully confidential manner?" whispered Nettie, seizing her sister's arm and walking away with her along the centre path of the Gardens.

"About my novel, Baby darling," cried Estella joyfully,

as she pressed a surreptitious kiss on Nettie's plump shoulder, which looked pink and tempting under the transparent muslin of her white dress.

"You can't mean that you were talking about books all that immense time, and nodding and whispering to one another just like lovers, and—at last—actually squeezing hands. Oh Stella! you gave me quite a turn, and as for 'mine dear Dosie,' she is ready at this very moment to pull your hair and scratch your eyes out."

"Pity she did not hear the very matter-of-fact style of conversation in which we indulged. Oh Nettie! Mr. Latimer has been so truly kind, and given me so much hope, such delightful encouragement——"

Estella was looking into Nettie's wondering blue eyes all this while, with such intense happiness shining in her own, that Nettie instantly became most sympathetic.

"Is he going to get it printed for you at once?" she inquired, her interest in, decidedly exceeding her knowledge of, literary details.

"He is going to introduce and recommend me to the right sort of editor," said Estella; "and that, you know, is more than half the battle."

Nettie did not know anything at all about it, but very readily took for granted that everything was quite as it should be, since Estella was evidently satisfied.

Indeed, her sister's manifest content was so delightful to the Baby's loving heart that it moved her to more profound consideration than anyone would have deemed the giddy little woman capable of.

She certainly longed to startle and to scold Estella by revealing the fact of St. Helier's appearance to her, and reproaching her for being too much engrossed by Mr. Latimer to bestow even a passing glance on the disconsolate barrister. But it was so delightful to see Estella gay and bright once again, far brighter indeed than she had ever seemed since that memorable musical afternoon at St. Helier's, that Nettie discreetly forbore from uttering the words which she knew would immediately damp Estella's ardour, and reduce her elated spirits from boiling-point to zero.

No possible good could result from her betrayal of St. Helier's appearance and abrupt departure, Nettie concluded, and so she actually abstained from mentioning the matter at all. A proof of forbearing discretion on the girl's part, from which many an inconsiderate "woman of the world" might learn a beneficial lesson, as regards the reckless imparting of "confidences" which can only serve to distress those on whom they are bestowed.

Estella, in blissful ignorance of Mr. St. Helier's entrance and exit in her immediate vicinity, was far gayer this evening than her sisters had seen her during the last fortnight.

Hilda had joined Mrs. Braun and Mary by this time, and when Estella, Nettie, and Jonathan also brought chairs, and settled near that group, they formed a very happy and a somewhat boisterous conclave.

Hilda was also in excellent spirits, and made them all laugh with her quaint accounts of some of the official

ceremonies and State parties in Rome, at which her presence had been commanded.

"Not for myself I was wanted, you must be very sure," she said, smiling; "it was all and only for the voice that is in me. That was the thing to be honoured with a ceremonious invitation. And if it could have presented itself in a box or in a marionette, it would have been quite as well received, no doubt, and certainly made far more welcome than now it necessitated a place and a bow for a very useless and not at all an amusing young woman."

"But didn't that sort of treatment make you angry and rebellious, signorina?" asked Nettie, looking wonderfully irate herself.

"*Cara mia*, for why?" said the Italian, with the utmost good temper. "I know well, many persons indeed have told me, that here in London, in the grand society, it is the same, and more than the same. *Gran' Dio!* that troubles me not at all. It is my voice they will invite and listen to, and compliment, and be amiable with; it is not at all me. And I am glad for my voice. It is good, and I love it to be made so welcome. The great people do not wish to honour me when they praise my voice, but whether they or I will or will not, I also must rejoice."

"Signorina," said Nettie coaxingly, as she crept close to Hilda's side, "tell us something about your carnival, do. Of all the things I most desire to see, a carnival seems to me quite the most tempting. Isn't it so?"

"It is a very gay, sometimes a mad and foolish, time in

Rome;" began Hilda, and stopping herself abruptly, exclaimed: "Madame Braun—see, there is Mr. St. Helier at your drawing-room window. Permit you that I go to see him?"

"I will come with you, mine child," said Mrs. Braun, hastily rising. She had not forgotten her daughter's previous indignation, and was very anxious to avoid its recurrence by ultra attention to those proprieties which Dosie was always lecturing her about.

"Please, do you stay sitting out here," Hilda entreated, turning to the Norman girls. "It is not yet eight o'clock, and I will persuade Mr. St. Helier to come back into the Gardens with us."

They sat and waited patiently for a long half-hour, but Hilda had either forgotten her promise or not been able to induce St. Helier to aid her in the performance of it, for neither of them appeared again that evening.

The fact was that Mr. St. Helier's position *vis-à-vis* the Normans was such a very perplexing one to himself, since he had not the least idea what prohibitive steps that irate parent might or might not have taken, that he preferred remaining on the comfortably neutral ground of Mrs. Braun's drawing-room carpet, where he felt himself both welcome and secure.

A little later, when Hilda's glorious voice resounded and was heard by the girls lingering out in the Gardens, Estella said:

"It would be useless to expect Mr. St. Helier out here when such a powerful attraction is keeping him indoors." She spoke with resignation, but quite without bitterness.

It was only natural, she thought, that he, who confessedly adored good singing, should forget all the rest of the world when he had the chance of listening to Hilda.——

It was Jonathan's happy thought which brought Estella back into a pleasanter train of reflection than that which had just been so completely absorbing her, for Jonathan said: "Mr. Latimer wants to turn publisher, and all for your sake, Miss Estella; he has the very highest opinion of your talents, and though he has not seen your book, he says he feels convinced that it must be a clever and a most original work."

"Did he really say that, Johnny?" asked Estella, brightening again.

"Those were his very words, I do assure you," answered Jonathan impressively, and turning to Mary, whom he regarded as the wisest and the best of women, he added: "Mr. Latimer wished me to tell you his opinion of your sister's talents, in confidence, Miss Mary; but I could not resist letting you all know what he said at the same time, and he is so clever, and so good a judge, you know, that praise from him means far more than it would from an ordinary individual."

"I am sure, dear Johnny, we are all very much obliged to your friend for his flattering opinion," said Mary, with her quiet smile; "but, for my part, I confess I am a little at a loss to see where his great judgment is shown in this instance. How can he know anything of the merits or demerits of Estella's writings, when he has only read them in her own bright eyes as yet?"

"Mary!" cried Estella remonstrating, and Nettie echoed: "Pretty Poll, where's your propriety?—we're all quite shocked."

However that might be, Jonathan was satisfied, for he had brought the smiles back into Estella's face, which had of late pained him by its ultra gravity.

Mr. Norman himself had inwardly fretted, and been quite anxious, about the evident depression of the daughter whose brilliancy and high spirits he had always keenly admired.

He feared that she had in some way become acquainted with the disastrous results of his interview with Mr. St. Helier, and certainly breathed freer when he saw her eyes sparkle once again, and noticed that warm flush of colour on her cheeks, which had been looking very wan and white of late.

He listened with particular satisfaction to her gay laughter to-night, and also to the light-hearted prattle in which she joined Nettie, as they both gave their father a very vivid description of the luxurious splendour with which the Shoddy-Princess had installed herself in her new residence.

Estella's sudden change of mood was not evanescent either. The trying events which had so thoroughly unsettled her during the past anxious days had taught her an important lesson.

She had discovered for herself, poor child, that no brain-work can be satisfactorily accomplished while the thoughts of the would-be worker are engaged on extraneous matters.

As long as she was pondering and wondering about St. Helier, his private affairs and her own, the novel was utterly neglected. She constantly caught herself scribbling "Everard" or "St. Helier," upon her blotting paper, encircling the beloved names with marvellous flourishes, which emulated artistic designs in their scroll-like involutions.

At other times, when thoughts and hand refused to obey the fitful inspiration of her distraught fancy, she would spend hours in endeavouring to trace a line of profile on the margin of her manuscript, a line which, after continual repetition and impatient alteration, she sometimes succeeded in making like the face which haunted her incessantly, the face for which she was daily looking as she sat in the Gardens with her note-book, and always looking in vain.——

She was very indignant with herself when she realised how much time she was in the habit of wasting over these idle fancies and erratic designs, but it was not until after another "business conversation" with Mr. Latimer that she became thoroughly aware of the absolute necessity of steady and attentive work.

On the occasion of their second interview in the Gardens, on the day following that first engrossing conversation, Mr. Latimer was in a far more practical mood, and gave the would-be authoress some useful hints, which were far more likely to further her ambitious designs than the fulsome compliments and ill-advised flattery of which he had erstwhile been so prodigal.

Now he took the trouble to explain to her that there

were certain accepted forms which constituted a quasi-literary code, and these it would be incumbent on her to observe as strictly as possible.

He instructed her as to the method which was desirable in the division and arrangement of her chapters, and further impressed upon her that the high and mighty authorities, yclept editors, required everything to be made as easy and comfortable as possible for their critical eyes, both mental and physical.

Estella having listened with wrapt attention to these practical hints, resolved to profit by them, and told her smiling Mentor of her intention.

"Illegibility is a crime with which no one shall ever charge me, on that point I am quite determined," she said, and pleading her desire to return to her work, she left Mr. Latimer somewhat abruptly.

Not soon enough, however, to save herself from being again perceived in close confabulation with him, by the jealous eyes of Mr. St. Helier, who had taken up his position at the drawing-room window of No. 39, where Hilda was rehearsing a new scena for his especial benefit.

Estella settled to her work now, full of fresh ideas.

She was determined to copy out the one hundred and ten pages already so neatly and legibly written, and in so doing she found that many alterations and possible improvements suggested themselves to her.

All this so completely engrossed her that she found no idle moments now in which her thoughts could wander into those treacherous realms of fancy which were peopled

exclusively by visions of St. Helier, nor did her pen now career vaguely over blotting-paper and clear margin.

She began to feel very happy about "Gwendolen" once again, and her old faith in the ultimate result of her work had returned to her.

She was quite prepared in fact, at a hint from Mr. Latimer, to hand him her MS. for revision, and to hear his opinion about her work. She felt sure now that he would be able conscientiously to praise and encourage her.

But before she happened to meet the "great man" again, her first volume was so nearly completed that she deferred submitting it to him until it really was a *fait accompli.*

"And how is our novel progressing?" asked Mr. Latimer, seating himself by Estella's side on one occasion, while she was as usual occupied with her "note-book" in the Gardens. This note-book, however, was already a preparation for the second volume.

"You have quite inspired me, and I have worked with renewed hope and courage since the last practical lesson you gave me, Mr. Latimer," said Estella, looking up at him with so grateful a smile on her lips and in her eloquent eyes, that he again wondered how it was he had not previously remarked this clever girl's absolute beauty.

"You may depend upon my doing all I possibly can to serve you, in any and every sense," he said blandly, and met her earnest gaze with so pleasantly encouraging a smile, that Estella in her turn wondered what could possibly have induced her to consider Mr. Latimer in any sense objectionable, as she certainly had done at one time.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DOWAGER'S AT-HOME.

From Mr. Latimer through Johnny Pry, a report was spread in the Gardens that the Honourable Benjamin Raynewater had returned home unexpectedly, and that the dowager countess had killed the fatted calf on his arrival, and in every sense received him like the proverbial prodigal son. Morally speaking, young Benjamin bore a striking family likeness to that oft-quoted ne'er-do-well.

This news added to the general excitement with which the invited and the uninvited Grenfellians looked forward to the 16th.

The At-Home now assumed a special character, as being the public celebration of the youngest son's return to the maternal nest.

The girls at No. 40 were all in a flutter, at the prospect of Estella's *début* in aristocratic circles.

Mr. Norman had not yielded very willingly to his daughter's entreaties on Estella's hehalf.

He was very well pleased that the countess should have selected the clever one among his girls as a fit recipient of a card of invitation, to a party at which talent of all kinds was warmly welcomed, but he could not bring himself to approve of the chaperon appointed to introduce his daughter into a circle where the aristocracy of intellect was supposed to vie with that of birth.

But what parent could have withstood the united

pleading and coaxing of three such winsome girls as the Normans?

They now cordially united their varying forces, and brought them to bear on the tender-mercies of their indulgent father. Of course he yielded in the end, and from that moment Nettie's days were spent in a whirl of excited anticipation, as to what Estella would wear, how she would look, etc. etc.

Estella herself desired to wear a maize dress, the fancy for which colour was probably suggested by a fact Hilda had confided to her. Mr. St. Helier considered maze essentially the tint most becoming to brunettes.

That this was an ancient decree in the code of fashion had never affected Estella, but as soon as she heard that Mr. St. Helier endorsed the dictum she instantly desired to prove the truth of his words in her own person.

Her sisters pooh-poohed the idea utterly, which made Estella the more resolute.

But one morning she was summoned to No. 39 by a three-cornered note from Hilda, of which many now passed between the girls.

The Italian received her visitor in her own room.

"*Carissima mia* Estella!" she cried, looking radiant as she embraced the friend she found more and more *simpatica*.

"You look very pleased, Hilda," remarked Estella, smiling; "what has happened? Has Mr. Arrowsmith made proposals to you already?" Mr. Giacomo Arrowsmith was the ostensible proprietor of the Great Diamond Opera House, though in reality he was but the factotum of young

Lord Goselyngge, whose colossal fortune and enthusiastic admiration for operatic music gave him a position of the utmost importance in the dramatic and lyric world.

"Nothing so magnificent as the mere hint of an engagement has happened to me," said Hilda, smiling. "But I have had a very pleasant surprise; look here, I show to you."

As she spoke she pointed to a large *carton*, and with trembling fingers hastened to display its contents to Estella. The *carton* had arrived from Paris that morning, and contained a triumph of Parisian art in the shape of a pale maize *costume de bal.*

"A present from Mr. St. Helier?" asked Estella, anticipating the information before which she inwardly quaked already.

"You might almost so call it," said Hilda, whose face was flushed with pleasure. "It is he who certainly has had all the considering and all the trouble of it." She continued: "As soon as Mrs. Vivian asked me to go with her, I begged Mr. St. Helier to tell me what I must wear on this occasion. I did not see you that day, Stella, or I would have begged you to direct me, as your toilet is not the same here as I know in Rome.

"Mr. St. Helier, who I am sure has the best taste in the world, remembered me of a dress I had at a great 'reception official' in Rome last January. 'That will be most suitable,' he said, and I thought no more of it.

"Now this morning a letter comes from my kindest and best of fathers, who has heard of this *soirée* at the countess's,

and who tells me he has requested Mr. St. Helier, who has much acquaintance in Paris, to command me a new dress of the corn colour, which most becomes me. The dear father writes 'he hopes it will arrive in good time, and make me look as pretty as he would wish to see me.'

"You know he loves me very much, the *caro padre*, and he is most proud of his one child. May God protect his beloved white head!"

Hilda folded her hands reverently as she uttered words which came as a prayer from her heart.

When Estella looked up at her she saw with surprise that the eloquent eyes had filled with sudden tears.

"We are two happy girls, Stella, you and I," said Hilda presently, "we have both a good father on earth, and we have both a Father which is in heaven!"

Estella took the signorina's hands in hers and kissed them reverently.

Her heart also was full to overflowing, but with a far keener emotion than that which filled Hilda's.

"Mr. St. Helier is very good and considerate to you, Hilda," she said after a pause. "It is well to have so true a friend."

"You say truly," answered Hilda, and thoughtfully added: "It is far better to have an independent friend like that than a lover like poor Ronald, who is necessarily under the control of a money-proud woman like his mother."

"Did you ever think of marrying Ronald?" asked Estella, approaching this important theme for the first time, and somewhat alarmed by her own temerity.

"I can scarcely say what I thought, or what might have happened," replied Hilda quietly, "had there been no Mrs. Vivian to contend with. Now I am—oh so thankful it is all finished!" she cried, clasping her hands and lifting the square chin which gave such a resolute look to her young face.

"Ah! don't let us speak of these things, I have much better to think of now," she cried; and, pointing to the ball-dress, added, "you have not said how you like it, Stella."

"It is perfect, 'lovely as a dream,' to quote Nettie, and you will look lovely in it," she added, with that ready admiration for others which always distinguished her.

* * * * *

That evening Estella, once more in consultation with her sisters, said: "I'll give up the idea of a maize dress and wear white as you suggest, Mary."

"Father told Polly he would make you a present of a new frock himself, in honour of the occasion," cried Nettie; "and oh! do let us go up to Regent Street to see about it. I wish you belonged to the ladies' club, Estella; you're literary and ought to be a member. Then you could introduce us, and we should get a delightful 'feed' in the prettiest room in London."

"What do you know about any clubs, Baby?" asked Mary, laughing.

"Quite enough to make me wish one of us was a member, if we can't all three be elected. You and I are eligible, I am sure, Poll, though we are not so clever as Stella."

"Failing the club, where can we go?" inquired Mary, laughing; "I very much object to the stuffy confectioners' places."

"We'll go to the Belgravian," said Nettie decisively "Mrs. Toegoode says that's the nicest restaurant in Regent Street, and ladies can go there with or without gentlemen. If you girls are at all nervous about it, I'll get Johnny to come and chaperon us—if father don't object, that is," she added, with a sudden remembrance of the failure of her attempted *management* on a previous occasion.

Father did not object this time, and after a very satisfactory visit to the Belgravian, Estella's lily-white garment was selected and purchased, to the exceeding delight of Nettie, who was quite as ready to rejoice for her sister as on her own account.

On the evening of the 16th Nettie's excitement had reached its culminating point. She ran up and down stairs a dozen times, in her eagerness to forestall any possible wants of Estella's.

"Oh how I wish I was going too!" she cried, as she eagerly placed the last spray of jessamine in Estella's dark hair.

"Doesn't she look quite too exquisitely lovely, Poll?" the Baby added, and the regretful pout on her lips changed to a smile of honest delight at her sister's beauty.

"Your dress is perfect, Estella," said Mary in her solemn way, "and you are looking your very best; I sincerely hope you will enjoy yourself," she added, lending emphasis to the wish by the gentle kiss she pressed on her sister's brow.

"I promise not to crush you the least little bit, but I *must* hug you, you darling!" cried Nettie, kneeling at Estella's feet and flinging her arms about her sister's waist.

Rising again, she said: "Promise you'll tell me everything, and try and remember what everybody wears, won't you, Stella?"

"I'll do all I can to satisfy you, dear Baby," said Estella, "and believe me I'd like it all a thousand times better if you were coming too."

"I'll do the next best thing to that," said Nettie laughing, "I'll carry your ladyship's train to the brougham for you when you leave, and I'll sit up to receive you when you come home."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, you wilful child," said Mary severely.

"Handsome is as handsome does," cried Nettie, and added in a startled tone: "I believe that was the door-bell, Stella; it is nearly ten o'clock too."

As Estella was crossing the hall, Nettie called her back once more.

"Be sure you talk to Mr. Ronald," she said, "and do please make him promise to come into the Gardens to-morrow. I want to enlist him in our tennis-set."

"I'll tell him if I see him," answered Estella, smiling; and gathering up her trained skirts she entered the carriage, in which Mrs. Toegoode had suggested that Miss Norman should call for her at ten o'clock precisely.

"Although we have only to drive down to the other

end of the Gardens," Adela-ida had said, "we shall be wearing all our finery and white shoes and all that, and, in fact, I never do go out in the evening unless I have a carriage to take me."

"Of course, Estella will call for you in a brougham at whatever time you choose to appoint," Mary had replied. And Mrs. Toegoode, mollified, decreed ten o'clock.

Estella was at the door of No. 3 punctual to the minute, but it was nearly eleven before the authoress had managed to secure her dress, and the manifold ribbons and laces with which she had elected to adorn herself.

The countess dowager had taken up her position as hostess close to the drawing-room door, long before Adela-ida, who was always unpunctual and untidy, had managed to close the gaping breaches in her gown by skewer-like pins.

The Honourable Benjamin, the prodigal son, was close to his mother's side, feeling himself very much at home again in the shelter of her gorgeous brocade.

He was a slim, pale, insignificant youth, whose only attraction, if so it could be called, lay in a quantity of long silky curling hair, of palest flaxen hue.

"He is still very delicate, poor boy," his mother said of him, with true compassion in her look and tone.

The natural maternal instinct which dictates tenderness to the frailest offspring had survived many extreme changes in the temper of the old countess. She held rank and title in her own right now, but time had been when both were generously conferred upon her (social Bohemian as she

then was), by the infatuated young earl, her husband. The eldest son, and present earl, physically robust and mentally unyielding, had ever inspired his mother with more awe than affection. But little Ben, who was weak and tender by nature, had crept very closely into the much-tried heart of the "eccentric" old woman.

She was a remarkable woman certainly, this Dowager Countess of Dewminster, and carried her years, of which there must have been sixty at least, with an easy grace that startled all beholders.

She also had a quantity of pale flaxen hair, in which neither roots nor tell-tale partings were discernible, only, innumerable love-locks, coquettishly falling on to the delicately-traced eyebrows, while other and longer love-locks heaped and piled up in reckless profusion, sat like a crown on her "aristocratic" head.

On her cheeks, and on her lips, lay the brilliant tints of youth, and in her restless eyes, which neither shading nor colouring could rescue from the cavernous setting into which relentless time had forced them, the vital spark of an undaunted spirit glittered still.

"All my Bohemians are coming to-night, for your particular benefit, Ben," she said, with the cynical hoarse laugh which in an ordinary woman would have been voted vulgar. In her ladyship it was "eccentric," like all her attributes.

"Coming from a land of the 'rough and ready,'" she continued, "I thought you would feel more at home with metropolitan specimens of that class, than with the ultra-

respectable 'dullabilities,' whose society your conservative brother affects."

"I shall be pleased, if you are, mother," said Benjamin kindly. He rather liked the continued enjoyment of that fatted calf.

"We shall certainly be amused to-night," continued her ladyship, laughing, "and after all, that's the only thing in this world that's worth the trouble of living for. When I have an Omnium Gatherum here, I enjoy myself as I do at the theatre; better, perhaps, because here the farce is played for my especial benefit. Had I known you would be back in time for this *fête*, I should not have restricted Mrs. Adela-ida in the number of her mountebanks. Still, a pretty sprinkling of them may always be found among my guests, who have broken away from the shelter of Addie's changeable patronage, and taken root at my parties on their own account. Ah! speak of the——"

Her ladyship checked herself suddenly, and extended her hand in reluctant response to the red paw offered her by an eager guest, who was following the announcement of his oleaginous name into the room.

"Dr. Hezekiah Poole!"

Doctor Poole was one of the "had beens" as regarded the gushing patronage of the Honourable Mrs. Toegoode, whom he had loyally attended through many a trying and wearisome illness.

The only fees he had ever received for his constant attentions to Adela-ida, were introductions to two of her party-giving friends.

What wonder that the doctor, who had social ambitions, should have made the best use he could of this *sub-rosâ* remuneration? Whenever he heard (and he always contrived to ascertain the fact in good time) that either the countess or Lady Shorne intended to "receive" on a certain evening, he made a point of presenting himself as early as possible, a bumptious aspirant for the welcome not very readily accorded him.

Poor Dr. Poole had been somewhat severely handled by those small, wiry, clever fingers of Mrs. Toegoode.

She had used and lauded him to the skies while she was the victim of some physical suffering, and under the influence of her first attack of *gushing* fever.

But after the illness the sudden ardour of friendship cooled, and Dr. Poole was quietly—dropped, as so many of the impulsive authoress's friends had been dropped before.

This evening the fussy little doctor quite dreaded Adela-ida's arrival, being in considerable doubt as to the reception she might give him. He would be only too thankful, he thought, if she would give him her finger-tips now, and yet a few months ago he might have been sure of the warm pressure of her hand, and the most cordial smiles of greeting. His doubts were soon solved, for at this moment, "The Honourable Mrs. Toegoode and Miss Norman" were announced, and the former bowed frigidly to the doctor as she passed him.

Estella, though unusually grave, certainly looked beautiful, and so the dowager told her, with a smile of appreciation.

The Honourable Benjamin entirely agreed with his noble mamma, and wondered if the girl had money.

But then she wouldn't be here, was the internal response.

"Will you take a turn through the rooms, Miss Norman?" he asked her, and was gratified to feel the light touch of her little hand upon his arm.

Adela-ida, whose auburn tresses were redolent of macassar, had pinned on a gorgeous garment for this occasion. It was made of green tarlatan, of that peculiarly bright tint known as arsenical, and trimmed with garlands of silver holly-leaves, a little tarnished now, since they had been used last Christmas to decorate the chandeliers and looking-glasses at home.

"Where's Toegoode, Addie?" inquired the dowager.

"He will be here directly," said Addie apologetically, as she saw the ominous frown upon the countess's brow.

"I hope he will bring you a clean tucker for your frock," said her ladyship crossly.

"My dear Dow," the authoress began hurriedly, but the dowager would listen to no excuses. Adela-ida, well accustomed to snubs from the countess, and quite willing to take "the good with the bad," as she philosophically explained to her intimates, did not waste any time in brooding over this last insult, but allowed herself to be diverted by the amusing chatter of a theatrical critic who arrived at this moment.

Estella, who had heard the ungracious snub to Adela-ida, secretly resented it, and felt very indignant with that spiteful old countess.

The girl not only admired Adela-ida's literary talents, but also felt a very sincere compassion for the poor hard-working authoress, who spent her days and half her nights in utilising her brain power for the maintenance of an idle husband. Estella had by this time heard many strange stories *à propos* of Mrs. Toegoode's chequered career.

But finding the authoress always pleasant and amiable, as far as she was personally concerned, Estella determined to defend her literary friend's conduct wherever she heard it impugned, and could not be made to use a harsher word than "eccentric," where Mrs. Toegoode was concerned. To bear malice was certainly not a failing of Adela-ida's.

She presently noticed that an oppressive cloud of dulness seemed to weigh upon the general spirits of the heterodox assembly, now crowding fast and furiously into the countess's spacious apartments.

"We must get up a diversion of some sort, the people are suffocating," Mrs. Toegoode whispered to her friend the critic, and approaching the countess she touched her ladyship's arm deferentially.

"I had better ask L'Estrange to recite," she suggested, "it makes a diversion, and people can talk all the same."

The countess, who had been constantly and assiduously occupied in receiving her guests, was really grateful when "Addie" came to her with so feasible a proposition for the entertainment of the multitude.

"Go tell him I shall be glad," she said, and the first smile poor Addie had seen this evening dispelled the gloom on her patroness's face.

L'Estrange, an impecunious actor of strangely unappreciated merit, was only too glad of the opportunity now offered to him of distinguishing himself.

Presently Estella, not much entertained by the platitudes of the Honourable Benjamin, was suddenly startled into attention by the sight of a ponderous swarthy man, wearing long black locks and a sickly smile, who stood up in the centre of the room, and, after violently clearing his throat, commenced in a voice that was still decidedly husky, to recite "The May Queen."

"If you're waking, call me early," etc. etc., declaimed Mr. L'Estrange, trying to make up for the thickness of his utterance by most energetic gesticulation.

Estella's eyes, directed by her restless thoughts, soon strayed from this affected mountebank and settled on the door again, the one point on which her interest had really been concentrated throughout the evening.

At this moment her patient expectation was rewarded, for she perceived St. Helier, as he entered and turned to shake hands with his hostess.

"Would he see her and come to her?" wondered Estella, thankful to find that she might watch this last arrival undisturbed, since the Honourable Benjamin's attention was engaged by an old gentleman who had approached, and was button-holeing him at this moment.

St. Helier was too far away to be conscious of Estella's wistful eyes. Indeed, he also was occupied in looking for somebody.

"Not for me," thought poor Estella, with a sudden pang,

as his glance passed over without resting upon her. Indeed he had not remarked her, as he was on the look-out for a maize dress, and Estella's simple white one became part of the rainbow-cloud of tissues, in which that ripe-corn colour had not yet found its place.

Estella did not know all this, but a sensitive heart is apt to divine that which most elates or depresses it intuitively.

It was thus Estella realised that to-night St. Helier would have eyes for Hilda alone.——

"Do you know those two men who are now talking to my mother?" whispered Mr. Raynewater, directing Estella's attention to the latest arrivals.

"I know neither," said Estella, and with a polite endeavour to appear interested, added, "the first is a very remarkable-looking man."

"Most ladies call him *handsome*," said Benjamin, "they certainly pay him every possible attention."

Estella opined that this was a novel dispensation of the relative duties of the sexes.

"And has this paragon a name?" she asked.

"You will best know him by his vocation," said Mr. Raynewater; "he is the editor of the 'Sphere,' the smartest and best coached of all the London papers."

Estella now looked at "the paragon" with quite a new interest. So this, she thought, was a real live editor, and a sensible editor too, since he introduced novels into his pages among the social and political gossip for which they were famous.

At any other time the girl would have felt and expressed

vehement delight at such a *rencontre*, for this was the very man who might accept "Gwendolen" some day——if only St. Helier would help her to finish it—would he *ever?*

She caught sight of his pale refined face again now, and an almost irresistible longing possessed her to turn her back on Mr. Raynewater and boldly make her way to where St. Helier stood preoccupied, but still alone.

"Behold the 'Sphere's' rival," announced Benjamin, pointing out a small delicate-looking man, whose appearance contrasted strangely with the herculean proportions of the other editor.

"Who is the little man?" asked Estella, without much caring to hear the reply.

"This man owns the 'Lyre,'" said Raynewater, much gratified by Estella's apparent interest in his conversational efforts. "The 'Lyre's' *spécialité* is alternately to chaff and snarl at the 'Sphere,' which, calmly conscious of its established superiority, can afford to tolerate these harmless attacks with a grin of polite indifference."

"But they are not enemies, are they?" inquired Estella, as she watched the rivals cordially shaking hands.

"Oh dear no," said Benjamin, laughing, "they are sensible men of the world, both of them, and as such quite aware that life is too short for quarrelling. They have determined to take it as pleasantly as they can—the bitter with the sweet, no doubt."

"Talking of sweets, here's Honey Latimer," he added, brightening as he cordially welcomed the honorary secretary of the Great Anti-Bee Company.

Estella, pleasantly mindful of her last interview with Mr. Latimer, greeted him with a charming smile.

Mr. St. Helier, whose roving eyes happened to light upon her radiant face at this moment, noted the smile, and again wondered if there could be any tie between those two.

CHAPTER XV.

REACTION.

A SUDDEN and utterly unaccountable rage possessed St. Helier, as that suspicion of some deeper understanding between Estella and Mr. Latimer again flashed into his mind.

With a feeling of savage disappointment he turned his head away, and—confronted Hilda.

She had but just entered the room, and her appearance, clad as she was in the exquisite maize costume, was creating a decided sensation.

St. Helier felt really grateful when he beheld so attractive a diversion for his troubled thoughts. He hastened to meet the signorina, whom he greeted with eager smiles and compliments.

Estella saw it all, and smiled—smiled all the more as she turned to Mr. Latimer again, and with an amount of animation which surprised herself, entered into conversation with that gentleman.

"By Jove, she is a splendid creature!" thought

Latimer, glancing at her shining eyes and flushing cheeks in undisguised admiration.

A sudden recklessness possessed the girl. She chattered on in a high tone, then laughed aloud, hoping St. Helier would hear her and feel shocked.

Yes, she would far rather know she shocked him, than tolerate the notion that he was totally indifferent to what she said or did or left undone.

As she had succeeded in attracting the surprised attention of most of the people in her vicinity, she could not resist glancing across at St. Helier, to see if he also had remarked her.

But Hilda was evidently engrossing all his attention, as she eagerly spoke to him on some subject which seemed to interest both of them.

All the time Hilda was speaking, however, she was eagerly scanning the crowd about her, for a familiar face she longed to see.

"Ah! there is Estella!" she cried suddenly, and placing her hand on her companion's arm, drew him across the room to where Estella was standing.

The girls shook hands warmly, and whispered pretty little compliments to one another, which had the rare merit of absolute sincerity.

Estella laid her icily-cold hand into St. Helier's warm fingers, but not one word could she utter in response to his cool "How are you?"

An ominous hush-sh now passed from lip to lip, and temporary silence being thus obtained, the air was rent

asunder by a vocal outburst uttered by a delicate-looking Italian, who was appealing to "all the gods" in the gloomiest of *bassi profondi.*

As soon as this melancholy exordium was over, Mrs. Vivian approached the signorina, and by the express desire of "her ladyship the countess dowager," requested Hilda to favour them all with one of her bravura airs.

"What shall I sing?" asked Hilda, nervously appealing to Estella. But Estella did not hear her friend, for she was listening to Mr. Latimer, who proposed then and there to introduce her to the editor of the "Lyre."

Ronald Vivian, who seldom lost a word which fell from Hilda's lips, now approached her and entreated for the Jewel Song from "Faust."

Hilda, relieved at not having to decide for herself, nodded acquiescence, and took the arm her modest adorer tremblingly offered, as he asked if he might be permitted to conduct her to the piano.

Signor Scuro was installed there, and Hilda having uttered the first words of her recitative, remembered none of the people about her, but surrendered herself with a genuine and delicious enthusiasm to the untroubled joy of hearing the thrilling tones of the glorious voice which, as she was wont so gratefully to say, "the good God had given her."

The silence which reigned while Hilda sang was by no means compulsory. Each member of the motley crowd was more or less amazed and delighted by the power and sweetness of the young Italian's sympathetic voice.

Even young Lord Goselyngge, whose colossal fortune and well-known mania for the lyric art gave him facilities for experiments and a wide experience in operatic ventures, stood spell-bound by the melodious tones of Hilda's fresh voice, which fell upon his ear as he entered the room.

Of Lord Goselyngge, it might truly be said that he was "not such a fool as he looked," and he was certainly and very rapidly aware that this was no common singer on whom he had fortunately lighted, on this his first appearance in Great Grenfell Gardens.

Lord Goselyngge had accepted the countess's invitation with an unexpressed idea that he was going to visit a "menagerie"—or rather a raree-show—and, therefore, his lordship was rather startled to find that the first tones that fell on his ear in this assemblage of "savages" were the utterances of so clear and highly-trained a soprano as neither he nor his factotum, Mr. Giacomo Arrowsmith, had ever been able to discover as yet, in all their searches for a veritable *prima-donna.*

"Old Scuro was right in his judgment, as usual," thought the titled head of the great Diamond Opera Company, perceiving the signor at the piano, and taking in "the situation" at a glance.

Complimenting the countess on her talent, in securing an attraction which even *he* envied her, Lord Goselyngge approached the piano, and having been duly presented to the Signorina Santarelli, soon entered into a lively conversation with her.

The listless crowd was moving to and fro in the spacious

apartments, commending, smiling, smirking, sneering, as the case might be, until the announcement of supper put them all in motion and sent them doorwards in a consequent stream.

Latimer, who had patiently awaited his opportunity, now hurried towards Estella and offered her his arm.

By common consent they made their way towards the farther end of the supper-room, where Mr. Snereton, the editor of the "Lyre," had already established himself, and was surrounded by a *coterie* of admiring disciples.

Mrs. Toegoode, always eager to pick up crumbs of information from editorial sources, was close at hand, and so was Mr. L'Estrange, who hoped to see certain "Dramatic Essays" he had written appear in the "Lyre."

"Mr. Latimer tells me you are writing a novel, Miss Norman?" said Mr. Snereton, with an amused smile of inquiry.

The attack was so sudden, and was followed by so many other point-blank questions, that the aspiring authoress was frightened out of all coherence.

She did manage, after some absurd hesitation, to inform the condescending editor that she had nearly completed the first volume of a novel, which she intended to call "Gwendolen."

"That title is bad," said the man of experience. "Talk to Mrs. Toegoode, my child—she can put you into the way of "fetching" the public, and it's quite a *spécialité* of Adelaida's to christen her three-deckers effectively."

"One moment, Mr. Snereton," said the successful

authoress, approaching the editor with a bland smile. "I want to introduce my husband to you;" and seeing the look of surprise on the face of the proprietor of the "Lyre," she added: "I daresay you have considered Mr. Toegoode a sort of male 'Mrs. Harris' hitherto; but here he is to speak for himself."

Here he was certainly ("And not much to look at, either," as Mr. Snereton remarked *sotto voce*), but he did not choose to speak to anyone but his enterprising wife.

To her he said, scowling as he spoke: "It's high time we got home. If you want me to wait for you you'd better look sharp, for I've to be off to Newmarket first train in the morning."

It was a peculiarity of Mr. Toegoode's that he was always going to be off to see either races or trainers, and that he could never manage to find sufficient cash for his travelling expenses without applying to poor hard-working Mrs. Addie for it.

His coming to fetch her from the party to-night was a concession made solely in reference to the money he would require her to give him for his journey.

She had received ten guineas for a story handed in only yesterday, and those ten guineas her husband was determined to secure to-night.

"If you are ready, dear Estella," said the authoress, in a far meeker tone than she was wont to use, "we may as well be going, as Mr. Toegoode does not like to be kept waiting—men never do, you know," she whispered gently.

"I am quite ready," said Estella, with an odd tightening feeling at her heart which almost choked her.

She had just caught sight of Hilda as she sat at the supper-table, radiant with success. A bright flush was on her face, and her eyes shone with extraordinary brilliance.

Lord Goselyngge sat on one side of her, St. Helier on the other. Ronald Vivian, opposite, was watching her with looks of undisguised admiration.

"Poor Nettie!" thought Estella—then added with an audible sigh, "and poor me!"

She had already followed Mrs. Toegoode out of the supper-room, when she felt her hand clasped closely in that of a person who must have followed on her footsteps. It was St. Helier.

"Your father has forbidden you to speak to me," he whispered hurriedly, "but *must* you be so cruel?"

Before Estella had even time to realise what was being said to her, he had left her side again and returned to the room which held "that irresistible attraction.——So thought the poor child with such bitterness in her heart as she had never felt before.

Mr. and Mrs. Toegoode had hurried on. She followed quickly.

In a few moments the short drive was over, and Estella was standing alone upon the doorstep of No. 40.

As soon as the door was opened, Estella hastened towards the dining-room, but before she had time to reach it, Nettie was out in the passage to meet her.

"Oh darling, you are home sooner than I had dared

to expect!" cried Nettie, flinging her arms around her sister's shoulders, and thus half leading half dragging her into the dining-room.

"Now, Stella, tell me all about it—was it very delightful? I'm not a bit sleepy, and should like to sit up all night and listen to your account of the glories you have seen."

Estella stood pale, silent, unresponsive.

"Dearest, what is it, you don't mean to say you have not enjoyed yourself?" gasped Nettie, gazing at her sister in unconcealed amazement.

"Enjoyed myself?" echoed Estella, with unmistakable bitterness in her tone. "Oh Nettie, Nettie! I never spent so wretched an evening in all my life." As she spoke, the rush of her late experiences seemed to overwhelm her, to the exclusion of all comforting thoughts.

The noisy indifferent crowd, her anxious waiting, his coming, the subsequent disappointment, her desperate struggle to force his attention by the hollow mockery of her seeming gaiety—all these, her trials and tribulations, came crowding upon her, and culminated with the cry:

"I am so very very unhappy, Nettie. I wish I had never been born."

Nettie, heedless, light-hearted Nettie, whose experiences of life might hitherto have been fairly represented as gay as a butterfly's, stood awestruck at this exhibition of sorrow—real, tearful, unaccountable sorrow, and Estella the sufferer!

"Darling, I am not very wise, and I fear I can't help you; but oh! do talk. Do tell me what has happened!

You must be better, if you'll only speak to your loving sorry old Baby.

"I can't speak," sobbed Estella, "but I can cry; and your tenderness comforts me, dear."

Nettie had seated herself now, and Estella fell on her knees at her sister's feet, and burying her head in Nettie's dress, found relief in a passion of tears.

* * * * *

"Darling, are you better now?" whispered Nettie softly, after a long long hour's wearying silence.

Estella did not answer, and Nettie, bending down, found that her sister's troubles were all forgotten for a time in a sound and child-like sleep.

CHAPTER XVI.

CONFIDENCES.

THAT earnest talk between Hilda and St. Helier, to which Estella, in her jealous apprehension, had attached so much importance, would have caused her little else than amusement had she been able to listen to its details, instead of only watching the outward signs of an interest which seemed to engross the speakers to the exclusion of all that was happening around them.

Indeed, their case was parallel to her own, when she had been utterly absorbed in consulting with Mr. Latimer about her literary work, while St. Helier, still chafing under

the novel uncertainty of his position in regard to the Normans, had come into the Gardens, intensely desiring to be reassured by an encouraging word from his favourite Estella, and found that young lady so completely engrossed by Peregrine Latimer (whom St. Helier *now* began to find exceedingly objectionable) that she could spare neither a word nor even a smile for the jealous spectator.

Unconsciously, and most certainly without any unkind intention, St. Helier had avenged himself for the misery he had endured that afternoon in the Gardens by the suffering he caused her as she watched his glad reception of Hilda and their subsequent most confidential intercourse.

If only her ears had served her as well as her observant eyes.——

"You have come very late," St. Helier said, as soon as he had complimented the signorina on the success of her Parisian toilette.

Hilda made no verbal reply, but slightly shrugged her shoulders and pressed up her lips into something very like a pout.

"I do not have a very good time in the house of Miss Theodosia," she said, after this significant silence.

"What is wrong? Don't they treat you well?" asked St. Helier in evident perplexity.

He was disturbed by a sudden sense of trouble and annoyance, and most uncomfortably reminded of the trouble he had endured about the period of Hilda's first introduction to Miss Theodosia, and during a certain very trying interview with the irate father of Estella.

Hilda, who was keenly sensitive, watched the clouds ominously gathering upon the thoughtful face of her much-esteemed friend, and instantly resolved to spare him any further trouble by passing over her grievances as lightly as possible.

"You must not distress yourself, not in the very least," she said eagerly. "Perhaps the fault is mine, and I have foolishly exaggerated my little trouble. Indeed, the old mother is most good and kind and amiable, and she shows me every consideration, but with Miss Theodosia all things are, I find, very difficult, and I fear she has by nature rather a naughty character."

"She is vicious and a snob, I know," said St. Helier crossly; "but I cannot for the life of me see how her personal qualities can in any sense interfere with you."

Hilda, noticing his vexed tone, instantly added, with a humility that was almost pathetic: "Indeed I do not think I am in fault, but she is really often quite cruel to me, and I am sure, for some reason which I cannot even guess, she does quite *hate* me."

"Heavens!" cried St. Helier, "how came so wild a notion into your head, my poor child?" It did indeed appear impossible to him that anyone could regard this sensitive soft-eyed queen of song with any but the friendliest feelings.

"It is no wild notion—I wish I could so delude myself—it is the simple, but the rather hard truth," said Hilda, compressing her lips as though determined to let no further complaint escape them.

"You are unhappy then. Tell me in what manner I can help you, my dear girl?" said St. Helier, whose compassion was aroused by the wistful and pained expression of the signorina's tell-tale face.

She was silent for awhile, gravely reflecting over their relative positions, and painfully aware that none of his former eagerness to help her was animating him now. Only a sort of forced compassion, such as he, being naturally kind-hearted, would, of course, incline to give to anyone who seemed to be in trouble.

"You can do nothing, nothing more; indeed you have done all a good friend could do for me already, *amico mio*," she answered, naturally lapsing into Italian as her words became tender.

For to the dear *padre*, the simple art collector, so far away in Rome, Hilda always spoke and wrote in his own language, although her dead mother had taught her English so efficiently. Her life had hitherto been spent in the artistic culture of her voice, and in the learning of that stage deportment which to an operatic singer is a *sine quâ non.*

Indeed she had devoted herself wholly to the fulfilment of the duties which she considered as of the utmost importance. And one of these was the care of her father's modest little home. As yet, therefore, she had fortunately had but a very slight experience of what is called "worldly knowledge."

To study singing thoroughly, and to fulfil the duties of her position as the mistress of her father's household, had been the alpha and omega of her young life. Now that she

found herself among strangers, with widening ideas and novel experiences thrusting themselves upon her day after day, she was frequently puzzled and at a loss to account for the varying emotions in others, which acted and reacted so strangely upon herself.

In all the turmoil of her new manner of life, however, there remained to her certain firmly-established facts to which she could still cling, and these now appeared to her like life-buoys in a changeable sea.

Her love for her father and her faith in him was firm as a rock in itself.

And then there was another comfort in her strong admiration for, and trust in, Mr. St. Helier.

Towards Estella and her sisters Hilda felt herself much attracted; to the former especially, but Theodosia awakened a decided antipathy in the young stranger, from the first hour of their meeting.

Miss Braun herself had never been amiably disposed towards the signorina, whose attractive manners and marvellous voice she envied and feared.

Hitherto Mr. Latimer had been Theodosia's devoted and persistent admirer, and when Mrs. Braun began to cool towards the boarder whose account remained so long unsettled, it was Theodosia who argued the matter with her dear mamma, and managed to obtain that lady's acquiescence in granting Mr. Latimer still more time.

Latimer, keenly alive to his own interests always, was perfectly aware of the pleading and counterpleading which had taken place between mother and daughter on his account.

And in his own "noble" way, he expressed the gratitude with which Theodosia's "delicate consideration" had inspired him. More than that, he unburdened his mind to her privately, and with an understanding that his confidence must be respected, and his affairs told to "no other living being," he enlightened Theodosia on the great Anti-Bee scheme, in the starting of which he had just now launched all his available capital.

Many and many a long confabulation took place on this subject between the heiress, Miss Braun, and the speculator, Mr. Latimer.

It will be readily understood that the ambitious young lady managed to feel her way towards obtaining an invitation for the dowager's At-Home, at the same time. How Latimer fed her hopes with unreliable promises has been shown.

So great was poor Dosie's chagrin when the 15th actually arrived without bringing her the anticipated card, that, in a fit of irrepressible annoyance, she sought her mother, and in a hard dry voice told her "to do her worst to *that* Mr. Latimer; summons him if she chose."

Mrs. Braun, whose maternal sympathy at once led her to infer that Theodosia's feelings had been wounded in some matter quite alien to the great question of regular payments, prepared herself for a decisive interview with Mr. Latimer, with whom she requested "a little private conversation in the dining-room."

"I have a business call to make, dear Madame Braun, if you will kindly excuse me," pleaded Latimer; but seeing

an ominous frown upon the old lady's usually placid face, he added: "I will return as the clock strikes two, I give you my word, madam, and I regret the delay."

It was the 15th, and before granting Madame Braun an interview which might be indefinitely prolonged, Latimer resolved to keep his prior appointment with Mrs. Vivian.

He found that lady radiant in the possession of the crisp bank-notes, for which she had just called at her bankers'.

She was quite prepared at once to hand over a considerable number of these to the Honorary Secretary of that marvellous and thriving Anti-Bee scheme.

"I read of it everywhere," she said enthusiastically. "It's in *The Times* and *The Telegraph* every day, and the Company must pay away a fortune in its attractive advertisements.

"The Company has a fortune to do what it likes with, you see," said Latimer confidentially. "And to prove to you how thoroughly you, a lady of means and high position, are honoured for your spirit of independent enterprise, I have ventured to bring you a letter, addressed to you by one of our directors, who saw me making out the necessary form of receipt for your money."

Mrs. Vivian glanced up expectantly.

"Is the letter from a lord?" she asked.

"It is from Sir Fulsome Venture," answered Latimer, who pronounced the name as though it were spelt with plums.

With the letter the form of receipt was produced from the capacious breast-pocket into which Mrs. Vivian's £2000 presently found their way.

The clock struck two as Mr. Latimer entered Mrs. Braun's establishment, and he found that good lady in the hall, directing the unskilful efforts of a new parlour-maid.

"I am punctual, dear madam, you see," said Latimer with his most genial smile.

"The luncheon is ready, so we will go to it, before we talk together," said Mrs. Braun, but the usual expression of good humour was not on her face as she spoke.

"As you please, madam," replied Latimer, offering his arm to the old lady with a profound bow. "I hope your little account is ready for me?" he whispered interrogatively.

"It is a big bill now, for I have had to wait four entire months for my money," answered Mrs. Braun, not in a whisper.

Theodosia, standing by the dining-room window, waiting for her mother, saw and heard what was going on. She was actually trembling with anxiety, and if Mr. Latimer had looked at her he would have seen a pitiful appeal in her glance.

But he was thinking of her mother at the moment, to whom he now said very confidentially: "Can I really have been so remiss, my dear madam? Believe me, I am thoroughly ashamed of myself; but oh! why did you not remind me of my obligation?"

"De bills was sent up regular, and I should have spoke long before dis time——" commenced Mrs. Braun, but catching sight of Theodosia's uplifted finger, stopped herself suddenly.

"I can best prove my regret at this ridiculous delay by

immediate payment, now I am reminded of my omission," said Latimer readily; and added in a more audible tone: "We will commence our private conversation with a complete *réglement* of our little accounts, if you please, madam."

Hilda now entered the dining-room, followed by some of the other "guests," and nothing further transpired about Mr. Latimer's accounts, which he settled in full, directly luncheon was over.

Theodosia felt that she had made a fatal mistake in allowing her mother to importune this noble creature, who had so many pressing claims on his time and attention. And Peregrine quite intended that Miss Dosie should realise his displeasure, though he never addressed a word to her on the subject.

Her most severe punishment soon followed however, for Latimer tore up an invitation-card in her presence, which he said the dowager had kindly given him that morning to fill up as he chose.

"I know no one who would care to go at so short a notice," he said indifferently, flinging the bits of cardboard into the waste-paper basket.

Theodosia had watched him in speechless agony; but no sooner had he left the room, than her ill-repressed vexation vented itself on innocent Hilda, who was making up maize bows for her shoes.

"Did you ask Mr. Latimer not to invite me for to-night, signorina?" asked Dosie, with angry reproach in her eyes and her voice.

"How can you ask it?" said Hilda, with serious deprecation in her look and tone.

She was not astonished by the other's harsh manner, in which she had already had some trying experience.

Theodosia, who, as we have seen, was baffled in all her schemes, and had the additional mortification of having deeply offended the man she so much admired, allowed her angry feelings to get the better of her judgment, and said so many cruel and bitter things to poor Hilda, that she, single-hearted and noble of purpose herself, was quite unable to account for these vagaries.

She did not in the least understand that she was but the hapless scapegoat on whom Dosie chose to vent a wrath which had its origin in her own discomfiture, and not in any deed of Hilda's.

This conduct of Miss Braun's, however, convinced the Italian that it was quite time she should seek a home elsewhere; and full of this fresh resolve, she met Mr. St. Helier at the countess's party, and immediately unburdened her mind to her trusted friend and counsellor, who, in this case, felt himself entirely at a loss what to propose, and how to provide for the lonely girl, whose position now appeared to be more than ever complicated.

On one point, however, St. Helier was firmly resolved: nothing should ever again induce him in any sense to become responsible for this unprotected stranger.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONFLICT.

Although St. Helier had arrived at so fixed a resolution in regard to his future neutral position *vis-à-vis* the signorina, he could not all at once sever his thoughts from the object which had so long occupied a very prominent position in them.

He had found her especially charming this evening, and though the confidences she had so naïvely whispered to him were in themselves of a most irritating nature, he had thought it very delightful to listen to the soft melodious tones in which the poor child told her grievances to him.

And then she had left his side for a while and had stood apart from the crowd thronging around her, and had sung—what word in the rich vocabulary of praise and admiration could convey the faintest idea of *how* she had sung?——The echoes of her glorious voice were still thrilling in his memory as he quitted the scene of the evening's varied festivities, and slowly wended his way to his solitary home.

He had held "social gatherings" of all kinds in special abhorrence for many a long year past, and his acceptance of the dowager's polite invitation had considerably puzzled himself.

He did not regret that he had gone; on the contrary, there had been certain incidents in this evening which he would on no account have missed.

He was quietly thinking over all that had occurred as he leisurely strolled across the deserted Gardens and up the incline of the Grove.

It was a sweet still summer night, peaceful and balmy.

The soft fragrant air was most deliciously welcome after the intolerable heat and glare and din of the countess's crowded and gas-lit rooms.

St. Helier was peculiarly sensitive to exterior influences. Those who knew him best had sometimes told him that he was as fantastic, or as ridiculous, or as touchy as a woman.

Certainly Estella herself could not have felt more gratified by the soft sympathy of the dim star-lit night than St. Helier did, as he took off his hat and lifted his head in silent contemplation of the vast star-spangled vault above. He had come forth feverish, restless, disturbed, a prey to contradictory impressions, perplexed himself, and consequently dissatisfied with the rest of mankind.

It was not mankind though which troubled and perverted his thoughts at this moment; it was their varying and unaccountable nature in regard to the two women who seemed of late to have effectually disturbed the methodical and isolated existence into which he, snail-like, had voluntarily withdrawn himself.

Why did those two girls, Hilda and Estella, persist in haunting him, either with visions of their charming faces, or with still subtler memories of their voices or their words?

He had felt terribly (ridiculously, he would have said) pained by what he considered Estella's marked avoidance of him throughout this evening. He surely had never

offended her personally, and there was a time not so very long ago when he had hoped——

Ah! whatever he had been fool enough to hope then must have come to a very sudden end since. That was evident from the girl's changed manner. Could fathers really regulate their daughters' feelings in this despotic fashion? Had Estella once thought—thought much and kindly of him, as he supposed, and had she, then, in marvellous obedience to her parent's tyrannical behest, ceased thinking of him at all?

How bright, how lovely, how lovable she had looked to-night in her dainty white attire, how piquante she was in all she said and did!

It seemed a pity though that she should bestow so many of her arch glances, so many of her whispered words on that brute Latimer. He was cast in a coarse uncouth mould, he could not appreciate the delicate *nuances* of her varying emotions and impressions. He would be sure to misunderstand the naïve confidence with which it was her wont to treat all men and then——

"D—— Latimer!" St. Helier exclaimed, as his thoughts arrived at this unpropitious climax.

Even the soothing influence of the balmy night-air was forgotten as he remembered the smile with which Estella had greeted his—his rival? preposterous! He had finished that part of his life in which women and jealousies and rivals played their important parts so very many years ago.

He had loved a woman once, foolishly, passionately, blindly. That was in his youth—how many years ago?

And she, into whose keeping he had given his faith, his love, his entire devotion, and—his honour—had cruelly, wickedly, pitilessly shamed and deceived him.

Was it likely that he would ever trust his happiness in the frail hands of any woman again?

No. Kitty O'Neill should continue to minister to his comfort, to his solitary and most delightful home, and to his general wellbeing. Kitty was a good and a clever old woman, and she had helped to free him from the toils of the unscrupulous Delilah who had bound him hand and foot, body and soul. Kitty O'Neill was the right sort of person for a man to trust in.

And one of these days he would go up into Yorkshire and see his good, his noble mother, who lived such a pure and holy life away from the world—the cold selfish world, and he would take heart of grace, and tell her the whole story of his chequered life, and ask her to counsel and advise him.

The confirmed bachelor laughed aloud as he arrived at this dubious point in his fantastic and introspective voyage of discovery. Did he intend to go to his mother, his dear good guileless mother, and ask her if she thought him too old, or too *blasé*, or too much hampered by the cruel recollections of his misspent youth, to allow thoughts of love and hope and matrimony to enter into his heart and life again? What was all this meandering and rhodomontade that had taken possession of him to-night?

The countess's champagne was not good and he had not touched it, nor the claret nor the sherry. He was far

too cautious to risk the headache which invariably followed on the imbibing of unknown brands and nameless vintages. Perhaps he was in his dotage already, or was his brain a little bewildered by the bright eyes and the heated rooms?

Estella, asleep and exhausted at Nettie's feet, little dreamt of the perplexed wanderer without the Gardens, who was marching aimlessly to and fro in close vicinity to No. 40, moved by the dominant desire to forget her altogether.

She had told him so much about her work, dear industrious little girl! Perhaps, when *she* was troubled and perplexed, she took refuge in her novel-writing?

Work!—why should not he follow so good so excellent an example? He had been very remiss in his attendance at chambers of late, and his partner had addressed several slightly critical MSS. to the Grove.

He knew he had been idling much of his time away, so much that one of the Grenfellians had utterly refused to credit that he not only had a profession, but himself considered that he actually followed it.

His visit to Rome had been too thorough a relaxation. He had contracted indolent habits while he was *en voyage*, and on his return he had had the care of Hilda, and there had been all that misunderstanding and fuss and bother.——

No. That sort of thing most certainly should not be repeated. One of its bitterest and most aggravating consequences was causing him perpetual pain and anxiety still.

Estella and he might have uninterruptedly continued that friendship which began so auspiciously, if there had

not been a seemingly sufficient reason for Mr. Norman's suspicious displeasure.

Alas ! how ready the world still was to misconstrue the motives and the actions of women—and of men !

In his present mood, St. Helier somewhat irrelevantly assured himself that the most blameless actions were always those which met with the severest censure.

He had entered his tranquil home by this time, and he somewhat impatiently flung back the venetian shutters and opened the windows of his library wide.

The night without was as quiet as the untenanted rooms he now traversed ; far too restless to think of going up to his bed, and therefore determined to make himself as comfortable as might be under the circumstances.

He wheeled his favourite armchair close to the open window, and placed the table which held his reading-lamp, a bowl of ice, some soda-water, and a spirit-flask, ready at his elbow. Then he went over to the rack in which his letters were always placed during his absence, and noticed that the evening post had supplied him with quite an unusual number of epistles on this occasion.

He glanced at the superscriptions indifferently, and selected three which he thought he might as well open to-night.

But first his pipe, the calumet of peace, must be lighted.

As he inhaled the first fragrant whiff of the bird's-eye called golden, and which he specially affected, he smiled again, and quite without bitterness this time.

It occurred to him to wonder if Estella would open her

eyes very wide, or if she would screw up her red lips in disgust if she should see him thus taking his ease with a pipe in his mouth.

Hilda had lighted both his and her father's times out of number, when they were all in Rome together, and had not been in the least surprised to find how thoroughly both men enjoyed their smoke.

And sometimes she had even sung to them as they sat in peaceful puffing silence; and she had never given herself any airs—not even pretending that the tobacco choked her or made her cough, as other women did.

Yes, Hilda was a sweet-tempered pleasant companion, and her un-English bringing-up had freed her from that conventional *exigence* which the truly British female regards as her especial privilege.

In the presence of the Norman girls St. Helier would never have dreamt of producing a cigar-*case* even, whereas Hilda herself would always and readily have supplied him with the meerschaum and the tobacco-jar, which mostly played an important part in his quiet evenings.

While indulging in these purposeless reflections, his hand had mechanically fallen upon the selected letters again, and he opened the first, which was a document of very businesslike appearance.

It was the synopsis of an intricate case which his partner had forwarded to him as deserving of his personal and immediate attention.

He read the lengthy statement through very carefully,

and the lawyer within him rejoiced at the perplexing mystery and puzzling contradictions which gradually presented themselves to his mental vision.

"I'll take that brief myself," he decided, "it will give me some wholesome occupation again, and it's just for the want of that I'm doing so badly now."

It was a breach of promise case, and the plaintiff was a young and attractive lady aged eighteen.——

How he would like to tell Estella the amusing details of such a case! How quickly she would apprehend them all! What a pleasure it was to talk to a girl who had so trained her mind that thinking had become an exercise and a delight to her.

She would not only enjoy hearing his forensic exposition of the cases brought to his notice, but she would also be quite able to appreciate the science with which he always sought to handle his subjects; and then, by way of mutual recreation, they would convert *cases* into plots, and those plots she could use for her novels, while he also should zealously endeavour to work.——As regarded her, those were very very visionary castles he was building in the future. But for himself, he must and he would leave off dreaming, and he would settle to his professional duties again, the very next morning.

Too long had he played the truant already, but now he would return to his work, work he had until very lately gloried in, and which he had always performed to the very best of his ability, keenly enjoying those difficulties which necessitated the exercise of the patience and perspicacity

which so eminently characterised him in his professional career.

"If a man is busy, and busy about his duty, what more does he require for time or for eternity?"

Before he journeyed to Rome, St. Helier had sedulously striven to act up to that dutiful standard expressed in Charles Kingsley's suggestive words, but since his return to London—— Bah! had he forgotten his manhood, that he should be vainly philandering thus?

To-morrow, yes, to-morrow, he would start afresh, and then no more time should be wasted in these meaningless rhapsodies about two children.

He was quite an old man now, and his hair was turning very gray, what could he have in common with girls in their teens? Well, his smoke and think had pacified him; he could go to bed now with a chance of some hours' sleep. But stay, there was another letter for him to read first, not a business communication this, but a thin epistle written on foreign paper, and in a small crabbed Italian hand, a long-expected letter from Hilda's father, his good old friend, the Signor Santarelli.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE ROMAN LETTER AND THE ENIGMA.

Rome, June 12th.

MY GOOD FRIEND,

Hilda writes to me often, of course, and her letters teem with your praises.

She speaks of her *maestro* also, of her voice, her many new friends, and her surroundings generally. The refrain of all her news, however, is invariably "that kind, or that generous, or that noble Mr. St. Helier."

This devotion to you, much as it must please me, knowing and esteeming you as I do, at the same time fills me with self-reproach.

You are surprised, and ask me why it is a trouble to me, that my only and beloved child should share my affection for the man I most esteem in this world, where few have appeared to me deserving of lasting regard?

I am writing this letter to explain my reasons to you, and I will leave it to you to decide whether or not they are valid, and also what course you deem it advisable to pursue under these circumstances. There is in return for my perfect confidence, one favour which I dare venture to ask of you.

Do not permit my letter to influence your personal conduct in any way.

Above all things, do not attempt to coerce yourself into imagining that the compassionate sympathy which my words may arouse in your heart, might pass muster for a warmer—a tenderer feeling.

That would be a terrible mistake; indeed, the *second* grave error of your life, and this time a fatal, because an irretrievable one.

When St. Helier had carefully read so much of his old friend's letter, and paid especial attention to the last paragraph, which was underlined to make it the more impressive,

he paused for a moment in evident bewilderment, and then instinctively adjusted the wick of his reading-lamp, as though that would help to throw some light upon the subject.

Finally he returned to the letter again, hoping that its continued perusal would give him a clearer insight into the thoughts which must have been perplexing the poor old signor's brain, while he slowly traced them in his small and crabbed writing.

When you were staying here in Rome with us you met Mrs. Vivian and her young son Ronald.

He is deeply in love with my daughter, and has repeatedly besought her to become his wife. He has also appealed to me for my consent, and has asked me to plead his cause with my dear child. As I like and esteem this handsome and attractive youth, I did urge Hilda to listen favourably to him, sure as I was that he would make her an excellent, a most devoted husband. But at first, neither his prayers nor mine were of any avail.

Time, which in these cases mostly works wonders, was not granted us, for just at this critical moment, Madame Vivian, who has not very fine sympathies, unfortunately offended my Hilda, who is proud and sensitive.

What their disagreement was I do not exactly know; but you, who are acquainted with both the women, will readily understand that they could never have agreed.

After that breach, Hilda refused to see either Ronald or his arrogant mother.

It was the first time my child had ever decidedly opposed me, and we both suffered much pain in consequence.

All this happened shortly before your arrival here.

And Ronald, who is still very young, and perhaps morbidly sensitive, had so tormented himself about my girl's refusal to see him, that he fell seriously ill, and seemed quite unable to rouse himself, or to receive any sort of consolation.

He swore to his mother that he was dying, and that he longed to die for Hilda's sake.——

Men don't die of love, as you and I both know, my dear Everard; but this lad certainly pined and fretted and wasted himself to a shadow.

Then the true spirit was aroused in the mother. She came to my girl quite humbly, and prayed her to lend a more willing ear to poor Ronald's pleading.

Hilda, touched by the other's gentleness, yielded——

"Good God!" exclaimed St. Helier, and the letter fell from his uplifted hand.

"So she has actually pledged herself to Ronald Vivian!" he muttered, and his face looked blank and wobegone as he realised the surprising fact.——

But that being the case, what could Santarelli have meant by that rigmarole in the commencement of the letter about sympathy and compassion and warm and tender feelings?

St. Helier was fairly puzzled now, having previously

put a construction of his own upon all those mysterious phrases.

The letter had fallen from his hand as he had read that startling word *yielded*, which happened to close the last line on the third page.

"What further does my old friend say in the way of general contradiction?" he mused, and leisurely returning to the discarded epistle, recommenced its perusal at the top of the last page.

Hilda, touched by the other's gentleness, yielded—to a certain degree.

She had promised to bind herself to no other lover by any word or pledge until after her début *at the Opera.*

Then Ronald, in a sudden revulsion of feeling, began to rejoice, and hope once more filled the young heart, which but a short time before had been ready to perish in the bitterness of its first despair.——

Ah! my good Everard, to us men of the world who have lived through all this so many years ago, it seems too ludicrous, and yet time was when we also may have felt it a matter of life and death.

You see I talk to you so much *en bon camrade*, that I forget *my* age, and most unwarrantably double yours.

Will you forgive me this injustice, and also my prolixity? I have very nearly completed my task now, and think I have fairly described to you the exact state of affairs here, when *you* appeared in our midst.

You know how Hilda pleaded to follow her *maestro* to

London, and you know how I, acting under your kind advice and offers of assistance, was brought to consent.

I completely abstained from all mention of young Ronald's love and hopes while you were here, because Hilda most earnestly implored me not to speak of the matter to you at all.

This she did when you had been with us a week, on the Sunday evening after her first serious conversation with you.

I had no idea of the motive which prompted her to this reserve then, though now it has dawned upon me.

"Why doesn't he explain?" muttered St. Helier; "I hate enigmas."

But the wistful gleam in his eyes, as he commented thus, betrayed keen satisfaction rather than wearying doubt.

Further details, questions, and suggestions were contained in the signor's lengthy and exhaustive epistle, which was continued on a second closely-written sheet. But St. Helier's interest in it ceased, as he came to the end of that fourth page which concluded with what he was pleased to designate as an enigma.

CHAPTER XIX.

"NIGHT BRINGETH COUNSEL."

ESTELLA'S sudden though profound sleep, on the ground at her sister's feet, had been the natural result of utter exhaustion, both mental and physical.

The poor girl had literally been overwrought, in consequence of the successive and contending emotions she had lived through on the momentous occasion which really was her *début* in London society.

The loneliness of her position in that great, busy, chattering, restless crowd of strangers, had of course enhanced what she had soon realised to be an ordeal.——

If only dear, calm, restful Mary had been there, the mere fact of whose presence always brought assurance with it; or joyous chattering Nettie, who would have clung to her arm and made her laugh where, alone and unsympathised with, it had been very hard to her to keep from crying.

Mrs. Toegoode had been particularly kind and considerate, Estella knew, but Mrs. Toegoode was as yet a mere stranger to her, of whom she really knew little more than she did of the rest of that seething, pushing, preoccupied crowd of "celebrities."

And Mrs. Toegoode very naturally looked upon such an assembly as that at the dowager's, from a business or professional point of view.

"Adela-ida is seeking whom she may devour, as usual," Estella had heard one large bold-eyed woman remarking to a thin and sallow literary "sister," as Mrs. Toegoode possessed herself of the arm of the editor of the "Sphere," into whose not unwilling ear she was evidently whispering some flattering confidences.

How bitter and jealous and cruel women seem to be to one another, Estella had thought, with a kind of instinctive

reproach to her sex. She felt quite sure, for her own part, that if once her brain's work entitled her to a place in the profession of the *literati*, she would feel in complete harmony with all the other members, men or women and would at all times be only too thankful to lend a helping hand to a novice if she had either the chance or the power to give such assistance.

Mrs. Toegoode before parting with the girl had very considerately volunteered to look over Estella's MS. and advise her as to what she had better do with it. This kindness on the over-worked authoress's part had, of course, lent additional zest to Estella's kind feeling towards her chaperon, and yet the poor child had felt herself thoroughly miserable, friendless, and isolated in the midst of some real but far more fictitious gaiety.

Under other circumstances than those which perplexed and distressed her last night, Estella would naturally have turned to Hilda for the comfort of companionship. But Hilda, she thought ruefully, was of course very much better engaged in whispering and listening to Mr. St. Helier, and had neither time nor attention to spare for her lonely and *forsaken* friend.

Why Estella should have so commiseratingly styled herself forsaken, she herself might have been at a loss to explain the next morning, but at night things always do look dark.——

This was the girl's practical conclusion as she lay tossing in her bed, wakeful, despondent, thoroughly dissatisfied with herself, and therefore with the rest of the world.

Nettie had very tenderly aroused her from that first heavy slumber which had followed as closely on her sobs as used to be the case in the days of her childhood, when the result of trouble, temper, or tears always was what nurse had called "a healing wholesome sleep."

Scarcely awakened by Nettie's timid exhortation to rise and come upstairs to bed, poor Estella had allowed herself to be led up into her own little "den," where Nettie soon managed to settle her safely in the pink-curtained bed. And there, restlessly tossing, Estella had passed most of the events of the evening in very dreary review.

The first faint glimmer of dawn began stealthily to creep in through the interstices of the venetian blinds before Estella once more forgot her troubles in sleep, which, coming naturally at last, was thoroughly invigorating and refreshing.

* * * * *

The welcome light of the glad summer morning was filling her room with its golden splendour, when the loud clanging of the dressing-bell aroused Estella to consciousness again.

But her first waking thoughts were very different to those last dismal and despondent ones, which had not left her, "while the dark night made all things dark to look upon."

As she sat up in her little pink-curtained bed now, shading her eyes from the too brilliant morning light, her mind instantly reverted to the few moments of mysterious but unalloyed delight which had been vouchsafed to her on the previous evening.

She remembered the hurried, strange, perplexing words which St. Helier had whispered to her, as he had so unexpectedly followed her out of the supper-room last night.

Surely he had seized her hand, and he had held it closely clasped in his—and he had called her cruel; yes, that was the word he had used. She seemed to hear it whispered in her ear once more, with the same lingering reproachful inflections of his voice which had thrilled her when he spoke it first.

And then, after a bewildering pause, in which she felt his breath upon her cheek and heard her own heart beating audibly—he had said something more, something about her father's forbidding her to speak to him.

Who could have told him anything about that wretched misunderstanding?

No one. She felt more than ever sure on that head now; for only Mary, Nettie, and herself knew of it, and she knew she could rely implicitly on their silence and discretion.

She surely could not have dreamt all about that mysterious little episode. Could St. Helier's perplexing words and looks and tones have all been conjured up by her over-wrought imagination?

No. He had spoken thus, and looked thus, and he had clasped and held her hand—it was all real, and she was —oh! so thankful—that it had happened; for it seemed to prove that he could still give her some of his thoughts and some of his attention, though, of course, Hilda had the greatest claim on both.

Well, it was less hard to think that it was good generous Hilda who was thus blessed, than it would have been had the favoured one been some unsympathetic stranger, thought poor Estella, conscientiously striving to ignore herself altogether. Hilda was good and sweet, and kind and affectionate, and after all she could not be so very happy, quite alone in this great unsympathetic crowd of Londoners.

Still, with that glorious all-enchanting voice, and assured of St. Helier's devotion, what mattered loneliness or a crowd? Surely, neither home nor sisters nor other congenial society would be missed, if one had such a fund of content within oneself.

"I would change places with her—yield my circumstances for hers gladly, eagerly—without one moment's hesitation," Estella murmured, concluding her morning meditation very suddenly as the breakfast-bell reminded her that hurry-scurry was now the order of the day, since she had not even taken her matutinal plunge as yet, and father objected to beginning his breakfast without the full complement of his daughters.

"And were you pleased with your entertainment last night, Stella?" asked Mr. Norman, smiling affectionately at his daughter, whose hasty toilet had but served to heighten the natural brightness of her eyes and her complexion.

Nettie glanced wistfully up at Estella, whom she had last seen so wan and so painfully weary. Then the Baby had tenderly coaxed and striven to comfort her sad sister, the nature of whose troubles—during a crowded *soirée* at a

countess's—seemed so utterly inexplicable to joyous, honey-sipping, flighty Nettie.

Now she glanced up, prepared to behold the same pale drawn face, with its reddened eyelids which had sobered her into profound though uncomprehending compassion in the darkest hour of the short summer night.

But the past month, which had developed Nettie's powers of observation, had taught Estella a certain reticence and discretion, which stood her in good stead now.

By neither word nor look did she allude to those secret griefs, for which she knew her father and Mary could not possibly have either comprehension or sympathy.

In reply to her father's inquiries, she answered glibly and with a happy smile, that she had been amused exceedingly; that some of the people were very interesting, especially the two notable editors, who carried on such a vivacious, wordy, and protracted duel; and that the two authoresses of the sensational and the voluptuous school had not impressed her favourably at all.

Hilda, she said, was exquisitely dressed, was looking her very best; had sung admirably, and evidently made a complete conquest of Lord Goselyngge, who seemed enraptured with her voice and her finished delivery.

The countess, she thought—perhaps it was very impertinent on her part to make such a hazardous remark—but she really had thought that the countess was not—not very ladylike.

Nettie glanced at her conservative father in some alarm at these ill-considered words of her rash sister, but Mr.

Norman, instead of frowning, laughed approvingly. "I am glad to find you have such power of discrimination, my dear Estella," said he. "Neither a title nor money can give birth, birth and breeding.

"The late earl, when young and foolish, stooped—stooped very low—for the wife who is the mother of the present earl, and whose station, therefore, commands our respect, even if her manners do not inspire it. I have, of course, made it my business to inquire fully into this matter before I could permit any one of you girls to enter her ladyship's house. And I have assured myself that it is in manners only her ladyship is wanting—her character is now, as it has been ever since her marriage, above suspicion."

Mr. Norman was certainly very partial to the sound of his own voice, and quite enjoyed the giving of exhaustive explanations on every conceivable subject and occasion.

Mary, who in some slight degree inherited this verbose predilection of her father's, was yet the first to check his indulgence in it, which she mostly contrived to do by adroitly diverting his attention from a subject which threatened to lead to a *flux de mots.*

"You have not said a word about Mrs. Toegoode, Estella; was she amiable?" Mary hastily inquired, as soon as her father's momentary pause enabled her to speak without precisely interrupting him.

"Indeed, yes, she was quite charming," answered Estella readily. "She is a much nicer woman than any of you give her credit for, and she certainly was very good to me all the evening."

"I told her a great deal more about my book than I ever ventured to do before, and I quite managed to make her understand that my writing isn't just done by way of amusement; but that it is real hard honest work; that I care far more for it than for parties and dances and dresses, and all that sort of young ladies' diversion." (Estella's sublime contempt for the congenial pursuits of her age and class was highly edifying to listen to.) "And Mrs. Toegoode believed me, she knew I was in earnest; and what is better still, she promised to help me with my book herself, and told me to go over and see her this morning, when she intends to give me some useful advice and practical hints."

Seeing the "signs of a coming storm" in her father's twitching eyebrows, Estella added in quick entreaty: "You must not say I'm not to go, father dear, please. She really is a good kind-hearted woman, and thoroughly understands the practical part of her profession too. Mr. Snereton himself advised me to apply to her for useful information, and I know if I *do* write, you would be the first to desire that I should be thoroughly acquainted with every detail of my profession."

Estella certainly was endowed with that essentially womanly tact which enables its possessor to put the man from whom she desires a concession into a thoroughly good temper with himself, by convincing him that his words of wisdom have been listened to and cherished.

"If poor Mrs. Toegoode's husband is a gambler, and a spendthrift, and a lazy——"

"Good-for-nothing fellow!" suggested Nettie officiously.

"That cannot possibly hurt *me*, you know!" continued Estella, far too much preoccupied to take any notice of her sister's interpolation.

"I only desire to see Adela-ida on *business*, and to receive the necessary instruction in rule and routine which every profession demands.

"When you, all of you, see my first novel in print, you will thoroughly appreciate the benefit I have derived from this official interview with the kind and experienced writer, who has offered me, a novice, some necessary assistance." Estella's face was so radiant as she dwelt upon the visionary prospect of her ultimate literary success, that even Mr. Norman began to *believe* in its possibility, and felt his paternal heart warming at the prospect of being known as the father of "that new authoress, a charming girl, you know," etc. etc.

So for once a young prophet did receive honour "in her own country," and by way of lending point to the contradiction, the homage was tendered before it was merited.

"You certainly are neither a chatterbox nor a gossip, my dear," said Mr. Norman, graciously returning to the matter under discussion, "and I really don't think this gushing female will do you any harm. It is not so much on her own account I object to her, as on that of her manifold and doubtful acquaintances."

"I'll promise to take my departure the moment the

visitors' bell is heard!" cried Estella, in high glee at obtaining her father's consent so readily. "Mr. Toegoode goes off to Newmarket at ten," she added; "so I was told to present myself at eleven."

CHAPTER XX.

"I DARE NOT."

"Mrs. Vivian has been graciously pleased to invite me to go and have luncheon with her to-day, and to inspect a box of new dresses which she has just received from Paris. So don't you stay too long at Mrs. Toegoode's, Stella, or we shall have Nettie fainting for want of someone to listen to her pretty prattle."

It was Mary who spoke as the sisters were preparing to go their several ways after breakfast.

"I think it's very shabby of you, Mary, to refuse to take me when you know I am longing to go and see that delightful Shoddy-Princess again!" cried Nettie, a pout on her lips and a smile in her eyes. "You might as well say you were unaccustomed to going out unaccompanied," she added, the smile mischievously illumining her whole face. "*I* have to state those ridiculous facts for Mother Grundy's satisfaction, why shouldn't you?"

"Little girls must be left at home now and then," said Mary, who was really sorry for the Baby, to whom solitude was always a punishment. It never occurred to the quiet

eldest sister, that it was for Ronald's sake Nettie so much desired to accompany her to Mrs. Vivian.

"And I s'pose you won't let me come with you either, Stella?" her sister whispered presently, as Estella stood, her hand on the latch of the window which looked out into the Gardens.

To open it, she had pulled up the blind, and a dazzling glare of sunshine now flooded the room.

Covering her eyes with her hand, to exclude the painfully brilliant light, she answered her sister's timid little petition.

"No, darling; forgive me if I don't ask you to come with me this morning; I really cannot do so. We are going to talk quite solemnly, you see, and only about business, so you or any third person would be *de trop* of course. Don't be vexed, you dearest old Baby," Estella continued, seeing the keen disappointment in her sister's face. "I am *so* anxious to accomplish some thoroughly good work at last, and I shall be so very much happier in every respect if I succeed in this undertaking."

She spoke very gravely, and her tone carried conviction to sympathetic Nettie, who quite understood her "clever" sister now.

"I'll only beg of you to tell me *all* she says about 'Gwendolen,' dear," she whispered, resting her chin against Estella's shoulder, with a pretty caressing manner which was habitual to her.

"I promise to tell you everything, Nettie, as soon as I return," said Estella gaily; "and I have still a heap of

news in reserve for you about last night, and the rival editors, and how pleasant they both were to me, and how hopeful I feel about 'Gwendolen' now, though no one seems to approve of such a simple title—it's only a girl's name after all, you see."

"But such a girl!" cried Nettie with enthusiasm, and suddenly recalling a previous train of thought, she added anxiously: "Was Ronald Vivian there last night? He said he should return from Cambridge before the 16th."

"I was too tired and too—too stupid last night, to tell you anything, dear Baby, but I have a number of nice messages for you from several people, and—'let me whisper it in thine ear, my darling'—Master Ronald desired his *kindest* regards. All the rest you shall hear on my return. Ta-ta! Pull down the blinds again, or Mary will scold, because the sun fades the new carpets. That's eleven o'clock; I'm off."

She made her way out of the window, leaving Nettie to exclude the sun's rays, while she herself rejoiced in their brilliance, as she stepped into the balmy beauty of the glorious summer morning.

The dewdrops which had glistened on grass and leaves some hours ago had all been absorbed by the powerful heat already; but the moisture, which had sparkled like diamonds in the sun's rays before, was in the balmy air still, lending it a subtle dewy fragrance, which to Estella seemed perfectly delicious. She inhaled it gratefully, as it appeared to lend quite a new zest to her capacity for happiness again.

Since she had become acquainted with St. Helier, her former enjoyment in the mere fact of her existence had left her; and instead of a psalm of perpetual rejoicing, she had felt wofully tempted to chant a continual "miserere" in secret.

Not a soul was visible in the long oval of the Gardens, and all the windows facing the morning sun were closely curtained.

Estèlla had never seen the "Recreation Ground" thus deserted before, but in her present mood this solitude was delightful.

It seemed to her as if she were in her own garden, as she stooped to inhale the delicate fragrance of a freshly-opened moss-rose, which grew in the centre of one of the jealously-guarded flowerbeds, which were the pride and joy of most of the Grenfellians.

They somewhat arrogantly declared, indeed, that theirs were the only Gardens in London in which choice flowers were allowed to thrive unharmed for the benefit of all the visitors.

It was only when Estella put out an eager hand, longing to pluck that rose, that she suddenly remembered she was not in her own territory, and flushing hotly at the thought that she had very nearly committed what she and all Grenfellians would certainly have considered a theft, she closely hugged her bulky parcel of manuscript and hurried on, keeping very strictly to the gravelled path now.

As she approached the small gate at the far end of the Gardens, however, she paused for a moment, pulling her

broad-brimmed hat well over her face, for the dazzling sunlight was almost blinding her.

How cool and inviting the Grove looked, its avenue of trees filling it with shade! Did all the branches meet overhead? Estella wondered, and moved close up to the gate in order to ascertain if the verdant arch made by the meeting branches of the first trees in the rows continued all the way along the Grove.

She was so very much interested in this question that she felt sorely tempted to walk out of the Gardens and along the Grove, in order to satisfy herself on the subject. Why should she not go? it would not be at all out of her way to go through the Grove, and then round to the front of the Gardens to No. 3.

She wanted to have another look at all those "bijou" residences, and most of all at that *multum in parvo* which Nettie had been so enraptured with on that eventful musical afternoon.——"And *he* called me cruel!" Estella pondered, leaning upon the little gate now, but not having passed through it.

She was glad to stand there and think—glad to know she was so near to the little house which his care and skill had made so beautiful. Should she ever have the chance of entering it again, she wondered, and would Hilda be there if she did, and which of them all would be most cruel then? For her part, she was quite prepared to suffer again, if only the delight of St. Helier's presence could be secured to her at the same time.

What would she not be willing to bear for the sake of seeing him now!

The desire within her became so urgent that with the vague hope of seeing him at his study window if she passed up the Grove, she was preparing to let herself out of the Gardens' exit, when she caught sight of St. Helier himself, who had just come out of his garden, closing the gate behind him with a sharp click, and sauntering lazily down the incline towards her.

He wore a straw hat with a broad black ribbon and light summer clothes, and Estella thought he looked more charming than she had ever seen him.

For an instant it occurred to her that it would be less embarrassing for her if she sat down in the shadow of the spreading oak-tree, against which a seat was most invitingly placed. But then he might not see her at all—he might pass on unheeding, following the road, along the outside of the Gardens.

Was he on his way to No. 39?——As that cruel thought entered her mind, she shivered in spite of the heat, and with this physical expression of her mental anxiety, she resolved to stand still where she was and wait for him; *she* certainly would not sacrifice this golden opportunity of a talk with him, for the sake of sparing herself a momentary feeling of embarrassment. Ah! here he was, shaking hands with her, and so delighting her with his pleased look of surprise that she forgot herself altogether in her eager response to his gay greeting.

"Up with the lark, and fresh as Aurora!" he exclaimed, reluctantly allowing her to withdraw the hand she had laid into his. "Since you are here, may I not be permitted to enter also?" he asked, drawing the gate-key off her little finger on which she had hung it.

She smiled her assent, and he unlocked the gate, entered the Gardens, and motioned to the bench under the oak-tree.

"Are you in a hurry?" he inquired, after a moment's hesitation, as the vision of her irate parent rose before his mind's eye.

Instead of any spoken reply, she seated herself, and drew the folds of her crisp white skirt close to her, thus leaving the greater portion of the bench unoccupied; then she smiled up at him as much as to say: "You see I have left plenty of room for you."

He understood and accepted the frank invitation of her bright glance, and leisurely seating himself by her side, he laid his hand upon the bulky parcel, which was now resting on her knees.

"More notes?" he inquired, with that dubious smile of his which had been haunting her for so many a long day past now.

"I fancy I see some blue lines; oh yes, and some writing, too!" he continued, drawing the manuscript gently out of its brown paper husk.

She did not attempt to check or resist him; indeed she was only too thankful to have him close by her side once again, and evidently a little bit interested in her affairs. "Since I've managed to find my way into the shell all

alone," he said, "you might be generous, and show me the kernel now."

With trembling fingers she untied the knotted string, and drawing forth the roll of manuscript, handed it to him without further hesitation.

She really felt that she was conferring an immense favour in allowing him to have a look at the cherished work of all her leisure hours during the last ten weeks.

He, for his part, was evidently much impressed by this decided proof of her confidence, and turned over the pages of the manuscript with as much care and reverence as even the heart of an aspiring authoress could possibly desire.

To a bystander, the little scene might have suggested the wistful anxiety with which a fond young mother watches a stranger handling the fragile treasure of which she has but lately become the happy possessor herself.

Indeed, the simile would not be an unsuitable one, for to Estella, this the first offspring of her brain, the mental baby, which after many hours of anxious thought and assiduous labour she had at last brought into something like form—this brain-child, in fact—was as important, and her feeling for it as anxious as, though perhaps less tender than, that of the real mother above alluded to.

"How industrious you have been, Miss Estella!" was St. Helier's first verbal comment; but his eager and attentive eyes had already said a great deal to her who had watched them so anxiously. "When first we spoke of this novel together," he continued presently, "I had no idea you were so thoroughly in earnest about it all. I believe

at that time you had only commenced to make desultory notes?"

"Yes; but now I have finished the first volume," she cried, with a smile of triumph and elation, which lit up her expressive face, and made it quite beautiful.

"And has anyone helped you with the story?" he asked, evidently interested now.

"Only dear Nettie, with her unflagging spirits and her shrewd comments," said Estella, smiling; and added: "I think I have been wonderfully fortunate for a beginner, for Mr. Latimer has kindly promised to assist me in getting my book read by some editor who is a friend of his, and who will certainly give me a fair chance."

"Oh!" said St. Helier, and said nothing more, but apparently busied himself with reading a sentence here and there in the manuscript.

Her sudden and familiar mention of Mr. Latimer's name in connection with the work, which was evidently her first interest in life, had given him a shock for which he was unable to account.

"Could there be any tie between them?" was the question which filled him with a sudden dismay.

Then he felt inclined to protest savagely against this unwelcome mental inquiry; but the sudden remembrance of her confidential colloquy with Latimer, as she sat on this very bench by his side but a few days ago, by no means reassured St. Helier.

He remembered with a pang, which he would not admit to be jealousy, that Estella was far too much absorbed in

talking and listening to "that brute" (hitherto Latimer had been considered a very delightful companion) to take the very slightest notice of him, St. Helier, who had broken an engagement, and walked into the Gardens on that particular afternoon, solely with a view to getting a glimpse of, perhaps a word with, the charming Estella, who had been haunting him as pertinaciously as he, all unconsciously, had been haunting her.——

He did get the "glimpse" he had longed for, but nothing more, as we know; and he had felt very disappointed and very unhappy, and as he walked away, smarting under a keen sense of the injury (?) she had done him, he had racked his brains with innumerable and most perplexing questions, to not a single one of which he was able to give himself anything like a satisfactory reply. Had she only pretended not to see him, to avoid giving him the "cut direct" which that crotchety old father of hers had perhaps insisted upon?

In any case his afternoon was lost, and even now he smarted at the recollection of the savage feelings which had agitated him then; so thoroughly upset had he been by the scene he had witnessed in the Gardens that he had felt himself compelled to go to Hilda and implore her to sing to him, and in listening to her melodious tones his ruffled spirit had regained its wonted calm. Poor Hilda! what a glorious voice she had, and what a noble generous nature! Ah well! if Estella had really engaged herself to Mr. Latimer—then he, St. Helier, would prove that he also could be generous, for he would strive to do all that lay in

his power to bring about the fruition of young Ronald Vivian's hopes of happiness.——What a commotion a double wedding from the Gardens would cause to all Grenfellians!——Ronald would probably require the services of the kind friend who had so generously helped him to win a prize in the matrimonial lottery, as best man. Should he accept the invitation? He laughed aloud at the ludicrous notion, and poor Estella, who had already been much perplexed by his extraordinary silence, asked timidly:

"Do you find it so ridiculous?" She pointed to the open pages of the manuscript as she spoke. He had all this time been closely bending over them, apparently absorbed in their perusal.

He started visibly as she so suddenly addressed him, and laughed again in his delight at finding her there alone by his side, while Latimer, and Hilda and Ronald, with the church and the altar, faded like dissolving views from his mental vision.

"Forgive me, Miss Estella," he said deprecatingly; "something I read here reminded me of a joke of my student days. How fortunate for you and your printers that your writing is so legible!" he commented presently. But he hardly looked at her now, and was speaking in the dry tone which always made her fear that she had in some way displeased him. "I had almost hoped," she said, hesitating painfully between the words—"I had hoped once that *you* perhaps would kindly have given me a few hints—a little advice—Mr. St. Helier; you offered to do so, do you remember? and you have so much experience, and

know all about plots and real men and women of the world, whereas all I could tell was about our former simple country life at Oakhurst, or just some little bits of experience which have come to me since—I have known you," were the words on her lips, but she recollected herself just in time, and discreetly substituted "since we have all lived in London."

"Hilda would make a fine character for a heroine," suggested Mr. St. Helier interrogatively, after another long pause.

"I have tried to describe her as an artist," said Estella, too much interested in her work at the moment to be disturbed by the petty jealousy such a remark would have provoked in the mind of the conventional young lady.

"Your gentle reproof has so painfully reminded me of my unpardonable shortcomings as regards *our* novel," he resumed presently, "that I scarcely dare venture to ask a favour of you now." He paused and looked straight into her eyes, as he added pleadingly: "Will you trust me with this until to-morrow?" He rolled up the manuscript as he spoke, and held it towards her, awaiting her decision.

"I should be very grateful to you if you would take the trouble to read it," she said, evidently gratified by his request. "I do not think you will be too severe a critic, for you will surely bear in mind that this is my first attempt, and that I have lived away in the country very quietly all my life."

"I will forget nothing you have told me," he replied.

"And you will tell me your opinion—your real thoughts about it all?" she said, rising and looking up at him as he

stood by her side, with so wistful an appeal in her eyes that he could not meet them quite steadily with his.

She at this moment was thinking wholly of her work. He was thinking only of her.

She started almost guiltily as all the clocks with one accord commenced to strike and she mechanically counted —twelve.

"I have missed my appointment," she said, but her smile betrayed no regret; "I meant to take my writing to Mrs. Toegoode to-day, who has promised me some practical assistance."

"Will you give me the chance of trying to render you some such help in Mrs. Toegoode's stead?" he inquired. "If you are not satisfied with me to-morrow, you can keep your appointment with Mrs. Toegoode then."

She had already shaken hands with him and was turning away, when he approached her again.

"In any case *I* shall depend on seeing you here to-morrow at the same time—and *alone?*" he said interrogatively; and if she dared to meet his eyes she would find very eloquent entreaty in them now, but she does not dare, for his low tender tones are thrilling her with a subtle ecstasy which is nearly allied to pain. "Will you promise me, Estella?" he repeated anxiously, and clasped her little tiny hand closely again, just as he did last night.

It was no dream, she remembers it all too vividly, as with an effort she tears herself from his detaining grasp.

"I *dare* not," she says, and scuds away over the grass, her white skirt flashing like a sunlit sail.

St. Helier stood motionless watching her, until she had disappeared beyond a bed of shrubs and flowering lilac-trees.

"She dare not?" he muttered half aloud in vexed interrogation. "Dare not what?—not promise—or not come?" A sudden smile lit up his perplexed face, as his eye fell on the roll of manuscript he held in his hand.

"She will come for this, if not for me," he thought with returning satisfaction, and sauntered leisurely away homewards.

CHAPTER XXI.

A SUCCESSFUL (?) AUTHORESS.

Although Estella hurried away from St. Helier in breathless haste when she heard the clock strike twelve, and reproached herself for not having kept the appointment made for her by Mrs. Toegoode, yet it was not in the direction of that lady's house that she bent her steps.

How could she possibly concentrate her widely-scattered ideas, or attempt to talk "business," while all her thoughts were so completely engrossed by that late momentous interview? She also feared that her crimsoned cheeks and throbbing pulses must surely betray her excitement to the most callous observer. No, she could not go through formalities of any kind just yet, she must contrive to

restore her mental equilibrium before she came in contact with any outsiders. To arrive at her normal condition again she felt she must be quite alone for awhile, and she longed to shut herself away from the inquisitive world, in her own little sky-parlour.

The greatest difficulty in her way would be to enter the house unperceived by her sisters.

Mary was generally too much occupied by her household affairs to trouble herself at all about those of her sisters, or anyone else. But Nettie, irrepressible Nettie, seldom settled to any tranquil occupation, and had a knack of "pervading" the hall, the staircase, and the passages, which ubiquitous inclination Estella to-day, for the first time, thought of as troublesome.

It so happened, however, that on this particular morning Mary had provided the Baby with an engrossing occupation. So while she was wearily bending over an arduous task undertaken to oblige her eldest sister, Estella, having crept in through the kitchen entrance, was stealthily making her way upstairs.

Had Nettie had the slightest suspicion of her sister's return she would have hastened to meet her instantly, as she was now burning with curiosity to hear the details of this morning's interview with Mrs. Toegoode, as well as a full, true, and particular account of the adventures of the previous evening, about which the poor child, in spite of her intense anxiety, had been left completely in the dark.

As it was, Chapman, the discreet parlour-maid, was the only person in No. 40 who was aware of Miss Estella's

sudden and secret entrance. And Chapman being of a silently observant disposition, had long since come to the conclusion that Miss Estella was "particular" in many of her ways. She was not steady and regular like Miss Mary, nor yet romping and flighty like Miss Nettie, but she was decidedly more peculiar than either of those young ladies. They certainly enjoyed their visiting and shopping expeditions, and were always pleased to receive their friends at home too. But Miss Estella mostly refused to go to Regent Street with her sisters, persistently shut herself up in her "den," and even if the drawing-room was full of company, never came down unless her pa or Miss Mary insisted on her doing so. And when "all the folks was out at the games in the Gardens," Miss Estella would either be sitting apart with her book and her pencil or she would be practising her music in the empty drawing-room.

Of all these peculiar ways Chapman, in her silent fashion, had duly taken note. So when Estella, walking on tiptoe, glanced into the pantry where Chapman was cleaning plate, and whispered: "Please don't tell Miss Nettie that I have come in, because I am very busy and do not wish to be disturbed this morning," the parlour-maid concluded that there was some more of that everlasting writing to be done up in the "den," and held her peace accordingly.

To bathe her flushed face, and brush over the waving masses of her rebellious hair, was the work of a very few minutes to Estella, and by the time she had restored the wonted order to her external appearance her inward composure had also returned to her. She was at this moment

absorbed and perplexed by two questions which appeared of vital importance to her.

The one nearest her heart was *how* to meet St. Helier again the next morning without raising any suspicion in the minds of her sisters. She had already determined not to fail at the trysting-place.

Her wonted courage had returned to her, and she now felt there was nothing she would *not* dare for the sake of another such interview as that brought about by chance this morning. The help she had been yearning for, the practical advice which would give a backbone to her work, and endow it with vigour and vitality, would all be forthcoming if once *he* took this novel of hers in hand.——

St. Helier had already become as a god to her girlish inexperience. What he chose to do must be good, what he thought or said must be right.

Such was Estella's conviction, and she clung to it as all fanatics do to the tenets which best accord with their inclinations. She had that implicit faith in St. Helier which is perhaps the most beautiful, as it certainly is the most touching, characteristic of the ardent love of a true woman. And since he had bidden her come to him in the morning, she would obey him—of course.

The second question which agitated Estella at this moment, as having an immediate bearing on that first difficulty, was how to manage Mrs. Toegoode.

The girl felt instinctively that if she chanced to offend Adela-ida at this juncture, she should at once lose all control over those circumstances, the reins of which she at

this moment most earnestly desired to hold in her own eager young hand. She knew that many and serious difficulties were crowding in upon her on every side, and being by nature brave as well as impetuous, she determined at once to confront the chief of those difficulties in person.

Acting upon this heroic resolution, she found herself a few minutes after she had made it in Mrs. Toegoode's study (?). Such was the appellation bestowed upon the most disorderly and unstudy-like apartment Estella had ever beheld.

Whip-racks and sporting sketches covered the walls, relieved by meerschaum pipes in various stages of colouring, *i.e.* of discoloration. These pipes had racks of their own, as had spurs, flasks, and other hunting paraphernalia. A breakfast service stood on one small table, and piles of MS. paper lay on another. Quills, more or less cut away, were scattered over both the tables and the floor; an inkstand lay upon the carpet, where its contents were making a darkly stagnant pool.

Estella noticed the fringe of a light shawl and the long pink ribbons of a bonnet hanging over the side of a chair, in alarming proximity to the ink-pool, upon the dismal surface of which a white glove rested.

Adela-ida herself, stretched at her ease upon a low lounging-chair, looked a fit "monarch of all she surveyed." A pink flannel peignoir, decidedly the worse for wear, was wrapped about her slim figure, and her auburn locks were hanging over her shoulders in unkempt profusion.

"You will excuse finding me in such a frightful muddle,

my dear, I know," she said, extending a hand to her visitor, which, like her gown, would have been improved by soap and water. "Only my very intimate friends are admitted into my study, you see, and they are always pleased to take me as they find me. I hope you'll do the same."

Estella smiled, and thanked her hostess for the privilege accorded her. And as she seated herself she made a hasty mental sketch of the peculiar arrangement, or disarrangement, of this abode of genius.

"Fact is, I've only just had my breakfast," the authoress said, pointing to the china on the farther table. "Thank your stars you haven't an idle husband to look after, my dear. Here am I, obliged to spend all my time supplying the greedy public with yards and yards of fiction, which does use up one's brain-power as well as one's pens and paper, although few people give one any credit for the lavish expenditure of thought. Well, that's my trade, and I don't mean to grumble at it, but it is hard to be responsible for an unnecessarily large house, its attendant expenses, and one's husband too. If Lionel misses his train this morning, I shall be blamed for his unpunctuality. If his trunk miscarries, the fault will be laid at my door. I'm quite positive already, that both train and trunk will be lost, for he started an hour after the first had left the station, and I've just found his keys and his luggage label *here.*"

As she spoke Mrs. Toegoode snatched at the light shawl, the fringe of which, on the other side, sank deep into the ink-pool.

The articles she had mentioned were lying among sundry others on the chair.

Estella rushed forward, and managed to rescue the descending bonnet-strings. Looking into the authoress's wan and wearied face, she said: "I am afraid you are a good deal worried, poor Mrs. Toegoode, and I will certainly not inflict either my manuscript or my inquiries upon you this morning."

There was more truth in this earnest assertion of Estella's than might appear, to those who are aware that her manuscript was no longer in her own keeping.

Even as she spoke, the girl assured herself that nothing should have induced her to torment poor Mrs. Toegoode with questions on her own account, while that lady was so evidently preoccupied by personal perplexities.

"Thanks for your kind consideration," said the authoress, with a profound sigh. "I will confess that I'm too much bothered to-day to think of anyone else's worries. I only hope for your sake, my poor child, that you may never find out for yourself what it is to have one's last novel, the work of six weary months, hang fire."

"But that can only be temporary," cried Estella reassuringly; "your books are all so popular."

"So I used to think," said Adela-ida deprecatingly, "and so I still assure my acquaintances and my publisher, but to myself I am forced to tell a different story; and to you, who are good and generous, I will not lie, as I'm forced, for the sake of my literary reputation, to lie to the whole set of gossipping outsiders.

"The publisher and I both expected 'Was Hers the Blame?' to go off readily. But it doesn't. He declares it is too peppery, and I am sure it's not half spiced enough for the vicious tastes of the day. Careful thoughtful writing is of no account now; the cry is always for innuendoes and sensation. Such books as 'Green Figs' go through dozens of editions, whereas 'Sterling Merritt' cumbers the warehouse shelves. I took more real care, and gave far more thought to my last book than to three of my ordinary novels. But what's the use of talking? the unsatisfactory results are the hard facts by which to judge of one's work. For me the specially hard fact is, that I was desperately in want of cash when I signed my agreement. So I sacrificed the future for the sake of a small sum of ready money. This will end disastrously for me, unless the fickle public make a sudden rush upon my book."

"I have not read it," remarked Estella deprecatingly; "the critics——"

"Exactly," cried Mrs. Toegoode eagerly, "the critics have so lashed and slashed me and my work, that I began to have some faith in its ultimate success."

"Because it was cut up?" asked Estella surprised.

"Yes," answered the authoress, with a dubious smile. "Universal condemnation by the press was the making of 'Can it be?' as it was also of that disgusting book, 'Green Figs.' But alas! the public veers like a weathercock, and now the contempt of the press, instead of benefiting, threatens to annihilate my last 'blameless' production

altogether. If I should forfeit the greater part of my pay, which, according to my necessitous pre-arrangement, was to depend on the number of copies sold, we shall be ruined—literally ruined. Then we must 'cut and run,' or let this house furnished, and retrench abroad for a term, and that just as I have at last managed to feel at home in a congenial set. Isn't it a dreadful life?"

As the unfortunate authoress reached this climax in the narration of her perplexities, she suddenly covered her face with her hands and sobbed aloud.

Estella stood silent, large-eyed, and quite at a loss how to comfort or console the unhappy woman, whom but a few weeks ago she had regarded as the most enviable of her kind.

"There!" cried Mrs. Toegoode, suddenly rising from her lounging-chair, and stamping her griefs down with a very determined foot. "There! I've made a fool of myself, my dear, and should be ashamed of my weakness too, if it weren't such a good practical lesson for you."

Estella's wonder shone in her questioning eyes.

"You may well look astonished," cried Mrs. Toegoode, "but I mean what I say. You're pretty and *piquante*, and clever and bright. You are a 'girl of promise;' you perhaps may have a brilliant career before you, as I had once—ages ago.

"Yes, I too was pretty and clever and all the rest of it, though you would scarcely believe it to look at me now. There was a time when I also felt that I had a grand career before me, and I entered upon it full of courage and a

delightful ambition. My first book was a thrilling a real success. I was quite a young girl too, with very little experience; but I had talent, I loved my work, and people liked it because it was fresh and original. How happy I was about it all! But I had an ambitious father, a half-pay officer, and he cared a deal more for the aristocracy of birth than of intellect. So I was married to the Honble. Lionel Toegoode, and——"

A long and significant pause followed these explanations.

Then, moved by a sudden impulse, she seized Estella's hands in hers, and added impressively: "Writing, and supporting an idle fine gentleman, don't go well together. If you want to write successfully, Estella, don't marry; or if you fall in love, as foolish girls will, profit by my bitter experience, and take care the man of your choice can at least keep himself; better still, both of you."

The troubled lines seemed to fade out of Adela-ida's prematurely wrinkled face, as she looked at the girl standing before her with sympathy and interest so plainly written on her expressive face.

"I like you, Estella," the authoress presently resumed, with the pleasantest look in her eyes which the girl had ever seen there, "and though, for many and many a long year past I have never been able to afford myself the luxury of a disinterested friendship, that really is the feeling I have for you. I should enjoy being of service to you, and that I can be, for no one is better fitted to put you up to the tricks of the trade.

"Our trade has its very decided tricks, you must know.

and we retailers must be pretty sharp, to keep pace with the wholesale dealers—the mighty publishers."

"May I come round to-morrow about this time?" asked Estella, flushing guiltily as the, to her, all-important question passed her trembling lips.

"By all means, child," answered Adela-ida cordially; "you needn't bring your manuscript just yet. We'll just sit and chat, and you can tell me the story. Then, by-and-by, I'll glance over a few pages—it won't take me long to know all about it."

"Good-bye, and thank you so very much!" cried Estella with wonderful emphasis, and was about to leave the room, when Mrs. Toegoode detained her.

"Your people don't like me, my dear; they don't quite approve of me. Oh, pray don't protest; it's right and natural for them to keep you out of the clutches of suppostitious adventuresses. I don't blame either your father or Miss Mary, but I would like you to know that I'm not quite the sort of woman they think me. I'm very reckless, very slatternly, always in debt, always in trouble, but I'm not bad at heart, and I would like *you* to know the best of me.

"Mine is a case of more sinned against than sinning, perhaps.

"Any way, if you have to mention the fact of your visits to me, at home, let it be understood that *I am assisting you with your writing, because I believe you will make money at it.* That will smooth your path at once. It's strange how the best (and sometimes the rich people are good too) and the wealthiest will ignore quite a multitude

of little sins for the sake of a possible pecuniary advantage to be gained from intercourse with the supposed sinner."

"I think I quite understand, and I certainly am very grateful to you," said Estella, and remembering with a sudden throb of delight how easy Mrs. Toegoode's words had made her plans for the morrow. "Good-bye, again," she added, "I don't know how to thank you sufficiently."

Adela-ida put her hands on the girl's shoulders, and kissed her lovingly on either cheek.

"Come to me as often as you can, child, and then the gratitude must all be on my side. *Au revoir.*" And thus they parted.

CHAPTER XXII.

JEALOUSY.

WHO or what could possibly have induced Mrs. Toegoode to propose that their future intercourse should be of a quasi-clandestine nature?

That was Estella's first surprised thought as she made her way into the Gardens.

Was there really such a thing as luck, and was that same luck smiling upon and favouring all her enterprises at this juncture?

Nothing could have happened more opportunely for her present designs than the pretext Mrs. Toegoode has just given her for leaving home frequently and alone.

Perhaps it was very wrong of her to rejoice in the chance which made the deception of her father and sisters so easy to her. But then St. Helier had asked her to come, and surely he would never desire her to do anything that was wrong?

Her father had certainly never forbidden her to meet St. Helier. That he might not approve of a pre-arranged interview she thought possible, nay probable.

But then the appointment for the morrow was their first, and it might be—their last.

The more reason for her to avail herself of the chance so unexpectedly offered to her.

But the mere passing thought of a possible final interview with the man she loved made Estella shudder with a sudden terror.

Yes, she loved St. Helier. Each passing hour convinced her of that all-engrossing fact.

Was she loved in turn? That was the awful, the unanswerable question.

Only last night she had felt sure, painfully cruelly sure, that Hilda was the sole mistress of the affections of the man who revelled in her glorious voice.

This very morning when Estella saw him strolling down the incline from the Grove, he was surely making his way along the road to No. 39.

This recollection brought the hot blood back into her face, and gave her that inexplicable pain which caused her to hold her breath, and press her hand over her heart.

How earnestly those two were talking together last

night; how absorbed they were in one another's whispered confidences.

Brooding thus, Estella sank upon one of the garden seats. But as the vision of those two rapt in engrossing converse rose before her mind's eye, she started up in a fever of jealous impatience.

What did it all mean? This suspense was unendurable. She must, she would know the truth.

She would go to Hilda now, at once, and, if necessary, demand an explanation.

Gedacht, gethan.

Estella was certainly in a very determined mood this morning, for no sooner had this second difficulty formidably presented itself to her impetuous spirit than she hastened to No. 39, and a few minutes later was received by the signorina in Mrs. Braun's elaborately neat drawing-room.

Estella had been a little surprised to meet Lord Goselyngge in the entrance-hall.

His lordship was departing as she came into the house.

Still, she was far too much preoccupied by her jealous fears, and by her eager determination to know the worst, and at once, to bestow more than a passing glance and thought upon the musical lord.

She did not stay to wonder why he was there, and had forgotten him altogether as she entered the drawing-room.

She had determined to meet Hilda coldly; to be perfectly calm, perfectly self-contained herself, while——

But how was that course of conduct possible when Hilda, perceiving her friend on the threshold, ran towards her and,

clasping her in a fervent embrace, kissed her rapturously as she cried: "*Carissima mia!* ah! but you cannot possibly guess what good, what most excellent news I have."

Then Estella looked keenly into Hilda's face, and saw that it was radiant.

"Sit here by my side, so, *cara mia*," said the signorina, "and, I pray you, do not look so grave while I tell you all my best news. Ah! you will smile now, for I will tell you the best thing first of all. *I am engaged.* What do you say to that?"

Estella said nothing.

Not a word could she utter. But she felt all the new joy suddenly ebbing out of her heart, just as she felt all the warm colour forsaking her face.

"Stella, you turn pale!" cried Hilda, somewhat taken aback by this sign of extraordinary emotion. "Is it that you fear I shall fail, or is it your true English horror of the stage, which, alas! Theodosia has taught me to understand so well already?"

"The stage!" stammered Estella, with a sudden quickening of her pulses, as she realised that there were other engagements possible to Hilda besides that matrimonial one, on which all the love-sick girl's anxious thoughts had been concentrated of late.

"Yes, of course, the stage, the opera; what else could make me so joyful?" cried Hilda eagerly. "Lord Goselyngge has just been here. He had already called upon Signor Scuro and obtained my address, and he has made me the most delightful proposals.

"I am to make my *début* as a sort of experiment next month for what is called the extra season.

"That will try me, and either give or take my confidence and his.

"The business settlements his lordship never 'discusses personally,'" he says. "They are to be left to Mr. Giacomo Arrowsmith and my agent. My agent! ha! ha! where is that amiable factotum to be found, I wonder? To whom shall I turn for help now?

"I have already felt, last night, that I have perhaps asked too much of Mr. St. Helier."

Hilda had laughed and joked when she alluded to the imaginary agent, but her look and tone had both changed as she slowly spoke those last words, which sounded regretful.

Estella, a little perplexed, was silent, waiting to hear more before she ventured on giving any opinion.

"This morning, which should be the most joyful to me," resumed Hilda, "is the very first on which I have realised that it is—terrible—to be all alone in this great busy London city."

"But you are not alone; you have good friends, indeed," said Estella earnestly, and she took both the signorina's hands as she spoke.

She was quite ready, now that she saw Hilda in trouble, to overcome her personal feelings, since her friend's happiness was evidently at stake. "I am quite sure Mr. St. Helier will be glad to help you if you need either advice or assistance," she said reassuringly; and as she spoke she felt

that help or counsel from him must surely overcome all difficulties, at once and for ever.

"Yes, it is true he would try to give me a friend's helping hand if I could ask him, but that I cannot," said Hilda slowly, and, by way of explanation, added, "he was so very troubled last night by my complaint of the uncomfort of this home, that I made up a fix determine not any more to what you call worry him about my private affairs. Indeed, I have always been a worry to him since I came.

"Theodosia has told me so, and even good Madame Braun cannot say no to it.

"But that shall be ended.

"I will find a new apartment, and at once, and all by myself alone. He shall be asked no unpleasant question for me this time. If I can be no happiness to him, I will no more exist as far as he is concerned. I will certainly, under no circumstance, consent to feel myself a burden to so good a friend."

Something very like a sob followed these lugubrious words of Hilda's, but she managed to laugh again as she said: "I do deserve to have a letter now to tell me I am not wanted at the Diamond Opera House at all. That would be the right punishment for my ungratefulness in being melancholy just when all goes so well for me."

"I have scarcely had time to congratulate you on your success and your most advantageous engagement," said Estella, who felt as if she would like to hug Hilda on the strength of her good news. "I am sure you know, how-

ever, that I am most delighted to hear that Lord Goselyngge has displayed such very good sense. Mr. Raynewater told me the young lord was by no means a fool—'not such a fool as he looks!' were *his* words."

"Ah! I do not think he looks stupid," remonstrated Hilda. "His blonde hair and his *dolce* expression, are perhaps a little feminine, but there is what you call a hiding power——"

"Latent," suggested Estella.

"Yes, latent power in his mouth and chin, and in his straight eyes too, when he takes the trouble to really look with them."

"His direct glance has certainly been turned on you with considerable effect, Miss Hilda," cried Estella laughing, and feeling very light-hearted as she lifted her finger in would-be reproof at the signorina.

"You may laugh at me, Stella," said Hilda; "it is good to see you gay. You also have so often been *triste* lately; why for I cannot in the least imagine, you who seem to have everything to make you so very happy. You will come to my *début*, will you not?" she added, suddenly reverting to the matter nearest her heart.

"Of course I shall desire to do so above all things," said Estella promptly, and remembering a former remark of the signorina's, she asked her if she had really determined to leave Mrs. Braun's.

Then Hilda unreservedly poured out her grievances, and confided to her sympathetic friend the systematic persecution to which jealous Theodosia had subjected her

throughout her residence at No. 39, but more especially since Mr. Latimer had not procured the much-coveted ticket for the dowager's At-Home.

"She will be more jealous and angry than ever now," whispered Hilda, rising and going to the door, "for I hear Mr. Latimer's voice in the hall, and I mean to ask him to help me in this matter of the engagement. He is a man of the world, has much experience, tact, and *savoir faire*, and he will undertake this as a business. He once offered me to arrange any such transaction for me, and to save me from the feeling of obligation he volunteered to accept a——"

"Fee?" suggested Estella, laughing.

"Yes," replied Hilda gravely, "and that is the only way in which I can allow a gentleman to act for me now.

"Once I thought otherwise, but Theodosia, with all her unkindness, has taught me some very practical lessons, and she has also, this very morning since breakfast, told me of a letter Mr. St. Helier wrote to Madame Braun, which plainly shows that he wishes for no more responsibility for me, and indeed has had too much trouble already."

"Cruel, jealous old Dosie!" cried Estella, and was about to give her own version of that letter, when Hilda requested Mr. Latimer to enter, "as we have a matter of private business to arrange."

So said the signorina, taking care to raise her voice so that Miss Braun, who was hovering about the passage as

usual at the hour at which Mr. Latimer was expected, could not fail to hear this mysterious invitation.

Theodosia, furious at this new breach of decorum on the signorina's part, and unaware of Estella's presence in the drawing-room, rushed down to the kitchen, and insisted upon her mother instantly mounting guard over that "flirting foreigner."

"Why not you go in the room yourself, mine Dosie?" cried Mrs. Braun, very loath to be disturbed in the midst of some absorbing culinary experiments.

By way of practical protest, she held up her hands, which were thickly covered with a coating of flour and butter.

But Theodosia, whose admiration for Latimer was strangely mixed with terror of his possible displeasure, did not dare to enter the room, the door of which had been closed, perhaps inadvertently, but none the less effectually, almost in her face.

And so it happened that Mrs. Braun, finding Estella above, entreated her to stay to luncheon, and volunteered to send round for Nettie also, since Miss Norman had gone to Mrs. Vivian's, by request, as Estella affirmed.

Mrs. Braun's hospitality was particularly welcome at this moment. Hilda clung to Estella as a certain protection against Theodosia's spiteful remarks; Latimer, who had just agreed to settle the signorina's engagement most satisfactorily for her, was very pleased to think that the dulness of the luncheon-table would be so agreeably relieved by the presence of the bright Norman girls; and Estella herself

felt that her new luck was evidently in the ascendant still, as any private interview with her sisters was now again delayed for some time to come.

Nettie, who had been chafing in her loneliness, and felt ill-used and cruelly neglected, came tripping round in eager haste, only too delighted to escape from the task Mary had set her, and from the "killing" loneliness of her deserted home.

So it happened that the luncheon party assembled at No. 39 was a cheerful one. Even Theodosia, reassured by the presence of Estella as to the nature of that mysterious interview between Hilda and Mr. Latimer, endeavoured to make herself agreeable to her mother's guests, and talked glibly to both the Norman girls, especially to Nettie, who sat by her side. Every possible subject of mutual interest was discussed between them, with one exception. Theodosia persistently avoided the most distant allusion to the dowager's party. The spinster had resolved that, as far as she was concerned, that "very mixed gathering" should be utterly ignored for all time to come.

"I would not have gone for worlds, my dear," she had just been saying to a neighbour, who also had not been invited, and was consequently quite of her opinion. "Just fancy the sort of people one would have had to meet, perhaps to speak to!" Miss Braun had added indignantly. "I hear that the rooms were literally crowded with professional singers, authors and authoresses, theatrical managers, artists, newspaper printers, and people of that sort, you know."

"Horrible!" the neighbour had replied, who was the wife of a Piccadilly grocer, and boasted of an income which enabled her to have a staff of liveried servants and a carriage and pair at her disposal.

Mr. Latimer divided his attentions most impartially among the ladies present; offering to assist Mrs. Braun in her arduous task of carving, joking Nettie about a much discussed innovation which he proposed introducing into their tennis laws, and saying just a word or two in a lower tone, sometimes to Hilda, sometimes to Estella, *à propos* of "business matters."

These "asides" were listened to with rapt attention by Theodosia, who sat on the opposite side of the table, and as their tone conveyed a sense of interest and intimacy it galled her to hear them. But this rage of hers was at least smothered for the time being, and so the social meal passed over pleasantly enough.

"I am quite determined to seek a new home, and at once, Estella," Hilda whispered as the girls made their way into the drawing-room.

"And without consulting Mr. St. Helier?" Estella asked anxiously.

"Certainly; for the future I must act alone on my own responsibility. If you knew all Theodosia has said to me on the subject of compromising others as well as myself by my ridicule dependence on a man in Mr. St. Helier's position, you would feel as I do now, that I must act for myself alone in future."

"Of course I cannot give you any advice," said Estella

uneasily. "It is a matter in which I am sure you can only be guided by your own feelings. But our Mary, who has practical sense enough to keep us all in order at home, would be sure to advise you well under any circumstances. Come round by-and-by and ask her, will you?"

"I must first think a little more of it all," said Hilda, and so they parted.

Miss Braun had suffered cruelly, and still smarted, under her keen disappointment at not receiving Mr. Latimer's card for the At-Home, and was tormented by envy of Hilda, who did go, and whose elaborate Parisian *toilette* must have made her particularly attractive. Judging of others by her personal experience, Theodosia naturally ascribed any attraction as due to the costume rather than its wearer.

With this double grievance aggravating her, the baffled spinster had attacked poor Hilda as the most fitting recipient for the wrath smouldering in her jealous bosom.

In language as cruel as it was startling, Miss Braun had revealed to the signorina the trying complications inseparable from her lonely condition.

St. Helier's letter to Mrs. Braun was quoted and perverted *ad libitum*. A lasting quarrel between Messrs. Norman and St. Helier was detailed, and its origin stated to be the intimacy of the latter with an unchaperoned foreigner.

"You surely must have remarked the unwillingness of the Normans to associate with you, until your position was guaranteed by the fact of your residence in *my* home?"

Thus delicately (?) Miss Braun diagnosed the unfortunate signorina's position for her. Hilda, as has previously been stated, was thoroughly unsophisticated. She had little experience of the world and its ways, but she was very observant and painfully sensitive.

Theodosia had very carefully deliberated on the mode of attack most likely to hurt Hilda's feelings, and to wound her maidenly pride.

This was signally effected by overwhelming the stranger with the painful consciousness of the very equivocal nature of her position as regarded St. Helier, and the consequent wrong she and he had done to those whom both of them no doubt esteemed.

Hilda *had* felt that reluctance on the part of the Normans, to which Miss Braun now alluded, and only last night the girl had realised that St. Helier was unable, to-day she would have thought him *unwilling*, to assist her in her proposed change of residence.

Miss Braun had commenced her remonstrated exhortation, which she called friendly advice, just after Mr. Latimer had torn up the dowager's card on the previous day, and she resumed it the next morning with additional asperity.

It was due to the announcement of Lord Goselyngge that poor Hilda escaped the addenda, for which Theodosia, warming amiably to her subject, had evidently prepared herself.

So it happened that, while St. Helier was striving to concentrate his attention on certain briefs just handed to him in Westminster Hall, and found his thoughts straying

in a most provoking manner to his chance encounter with the interesting authoress, and back again to the enigma hinted at in old Santarelli's letter, Hilda (the enigma) had resolved to act quite independently of the guide her father had chosen for her, and Estella was equally determined to lose no chance of meeting the man from whom her father had been most anxious to separate her.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"ENGAGED."

After the luncheon at Mrs. Braun's, Theodosia and Nettie resolved to "cool" themselves by practising certain elaborate tennis manœuvres in the Gardens.

Hilda and Estella sauntered out also, but with no more ambitious intention than to rest quietly in the shadiest spot they could find.

"You here, Mrs. Toegoode?" cried Estella, perceiving the authoress comfortably extended on her own lounging-chair.

"I was literally suffocated indoors, so I brought my writing out with me, and am just scribbling a few chapters in pencil which I must copy this evening, as the printers have sent up for the end of my story twice already to-day. It's my contribution to one of the 'penny dreadfuls,' and though it is not the height of my ambition to work for that kind of paper, beggars can't be choosers, you know."

Thus, with a weary sigh, spoke Adela-ida, and threw her pencil and MS. book on the grass by her side.

"Signorina, you look pale," she added, glancing up into Hilda's face; "was the heat or the universal adulation too much for you last night?"

Hilda smiled dubiously, and gently shook her head. Estella, who was standing beside her, laid her hand affectionately on her friend's arm, and replying to Mrs. Toegoode's inquiry, said:

"Hilda is worried, she is not very happy at No. 39, and wants to find another home without delay.

"You have been in this neighbourhood a long time, Mrs. Toegoode, cannot you give us a suitable introduction to a pleasant family who take boarders?"

Adela-ida sat in unresponsive silence for a time, but the changing expression of her face showed that she was considering.

At last she said: "I do know just the home, a real home this, which would suit your friend, Miss Estella."

"Indeed? and is it not too, not very, far from these Gardens?" asked Hilda anxiously.

"It is in Grenfell Street, quite close by," said Mrs. Toegoode.

Estella pointed out the commencement of the street to Hilda. It lay in the opposite direction to the Grove.

"An aunt of mine lives there—a Miss Trevor—avowedly an old maid, and not in the least ashamed of her gray locks and her spinsterhood," said Adela-ida.

"She is a lady, and would be a very suitable

chaperon for the signorina should she be required in that capacity. I will go over to-night and prepare her, and if the signorina will call at No. 25 to-morrow, I will make an appointment for her."

"Let it be in the morning, if you please," said Hilda.

"Say two in the afternoon, dear, if that is not inconvenient to you," interrupted Estella, with a blush that was quite uncalled for; "either Mary or I would like to accompany you, and we are both engaged in the morning.

"You are too good," answered Hilda gratefully. "I will be ready at two o'clock."

While the momentous question of Hilda's future home was thus being discussed at one end of the Gardens, Nettie, more than "cooled" by her violent exertions at the tennis-nets, sauntered away towards a seat at the farther end of the Gardens, which Mrs. Vivian had just quitted, making her way indoors, closely followed by the gallant Latimer.

Both Theodosia and Nettie had watched those two as they entered the gate of No. 20, and the latter said with her most knowing and most aggravating air:

"They make a handsome couple, don't they? Her raven tresses and his white locks form just the sort of complementary contrast which in matrimony is as desirable as in colours; don't you think so, Miss Braun?"

"You cannot imagine that that bold American woman with a grown-up son really has any designs on Mr. Latimer?"

asked Theodosia, changing colour unbecomingly, and speaking with exceeding bitterness.

"I should certainly think dear little Latimer quite able to frustrate her knavish tricks," laughed Nettie, and added:

"There is the grown-up son; I'll go and inquire into the machinations of his bold ma, shall I?"

Before Miss Braun, choking with indignation, had time to reply, Nettie was sauntering towards the vacated seat, on which she settled herself just as Ronald reached it.

"What an age it is since we have met, Mr. Vivian," said the Baby, showing by her happy smile the pleasure this long-delayed encounter gave her.

"Won't you sit down and talk to me a little bit?" she added wistfully, as she saw him standing uncomfortably beside her, his eyes glancing eagerly in the direction of the group of ladies of which Hilda was the centre.

By way of reply to Nettie's pretty invitation, he seated himself and said:

"How was it you were not at the great party last night, Miss Nettie?"

"Are you quite sure I was not there?" she queried teazingly.

"Quite positive," he replied gravely. "I looked for you far too anxiously to have missed you had you been there, and at last in my despair I inquired about you, and your sister told me you had not come."

"I think it is as well I stayed away," cried Nettie, "to judge by the effect of the huge dissipation on others. You

look like a photograph of pale Melancholy. Estella told me she had been miserable, or—bored" (Nettie quickly corrected herself, fearing her confidences were indiscreet), "yes, *bored*; and Hilda——"

"The signorina is not pale or miserable or bored, I trust," cried Ronald, warming into sudden animation.

"Well, she is not half as happy as she ought to be, now that she is engaged."

Estella had already found time to tell Nettie some of the occurrences of the morning, and had not omitted to mention the shock that word *engaged* had given her.

And now Nettie, piqued by the too evident interest Ronald showed in the signorina, determined to punish him by a small fright.

But when she perceived the utter *bouleversement* which her news brought about, she remembered his threatened fainting-fit at Mr. St. Helier's tea-party, and hastened to explain.

"Lord Goselyngge has engaged Hilda for the extra season at the Diamond Opera House, and she is to make her *début* next month."

"Her *début* next month?" echoed Ronald dubiously, and added below his breath: "Then at last I shall know my fate."

He was still awfully pale, and poor Nettie was ready to cry, she felt so hurt and mortified.

If this was the style in which he meant to sit by her side and talk pleasantly to her, she would rather he went straight away to the other end of the Gardens at once, and

spoke out to the only person for whom he had eyes and thoughts.

Nettie's inward chafing suddenly found vent in impatient speech.

"You are in love with Hilda, Mr. Vivian, desperately in love. You see I know all about it, so pray don't attempt to deny the fact. It would be really nice and friendly of you now, if you would confide in me.

"Hilda and I have had many a long talk together about Rome, and you and your mother, and all that sort of thing."

Perhaps it was the sight of Jonathan standing miserably alone at some little distance from her, which caused Nettie to conclude her interrogatory speech with his favourite phrase.

Ronald had listened to his pretty baby-faced companion with intense interest, and now said quietly and without any hesitation:

"What you say is quite true, Miss Nettie, and I am proud to own the fact of my love for Hilda, although it has only brought pain and sorrow to her and to me hitherto."

Nettie listened in miserable silence.

She felt as if she must cry presently, though she did not in the least know why, only she wished she had not taken Ronald's love for Hilda quite for granted, and she was firmly resolved not to let a single tear fall until she had hurried away indoors, which she was now longing to do at once.

"You say that Hilda has spoken to you of Rome and of me?" Ronald began anxiously. "Did she tell you *all!*"

"Oh no!" cried Nettie, with a laugh in which only her sisters could have recognised the suppressed sob. "Oh dear no; Hilda has never honoured me with any *confidences*; she is Estella's particular friend, you know, not mine;" and she is the worst enemy to both of us, thought Nettie bitterly, but she suppressed this mental protest, and continued quietly: "Our talk about you, Mr. Vivian, has only been in the course of general conversation, when the signorina has described the balls and receptions and *fêtes* in Rome.

"You seem to have gone wherever she went, and she told us she was asked everywhere on account of her singing. Happy Hilda!"

Nettie felt that that half-envious exclamation warranted a sigh, and so ventured to relieve her poor little over-burdened heart with a profound Heigh-ho!

"Heigh-ho!?" echoed Ronald, quite as earnestly; and perhaps feeling that these expressive exclamations had made mutual confidences easy and natural, he plunged into a most minute account of his love, his sufferings, his hopes, and doubts, and fears; told Nettie how, after decided opposition, Mrs. Vivian had finally herself consented to plead his cause with Hilda, and how he expected to know his fate as soon as the signorina had made her *début*, "and that will be very soon now?" he added interrogatively, and Nettie's tender little heart was very much touched by the keen anxiety in his beautiful young face.

Yes, she did think him beautiful, and she wished he was her brother, so that she might fling her arms around his neck and kiss and pet and console him.

Then she would go to Hilda and remonstrate with her, and talk to and reason with her, and plead Ronald's cause so effectively that Hilda would have to yield, and then Ronald would smile and be happy again as she, Nettie, loved to see him.

So absorbed were these two young people by their earnest thoughts and confidences, that neither of them had taken any notice of poor Jonathan, who had approached within speaking distance now, but was far too much dismayed by the sight of Nettie's intense preoccupation, to venture to interrupt her.

He had been standing patiently awaiting a welcoming word from her, and had shifted the weight of his lanky figure awkwardly from one large foot to the other, as was his habit when ill at ease; but neither this fidgety movement nor his anxious glances had attracted more than the passing attention of Nettie, whose little head was too full of her own troubles at this moment to leave her free to consider those of others, as she was usually so ready to do.

The fact of Nettie's personal suffering made her peculiarly sympathetic in her manner towards Ronald, and he, all absorbed as he was by his humble adoration of the distant, cold, and talented Hilda, was just in the mood to appreciate the tender and child-like proximity and simply feminine attractions of Baby Nettie.

He looked into her eyes as he had never cared to do

before, and found their clear cerulean depths full of a kindly sympathy, which he had so often and quite vainly sought in the darkly pathetic glance of his soul's idol.

He noticed Nettie's pouting lips too, and wished he had a sister just like this sweet saucy maiden, or, better still, that he and she might enter into some fraternal bond, in which they could confide all their several thoughts, anxieties, hopes, and fears to one another, take counsel and comfort together, and thus each be better able, through the other's strengthening influence, to bear the brunt of the battle of life.

"You have no brother, Miss Nettie?" Roland inquired, pursuing his train of thought aloud.

"No," said Nettie, smiling wistfully; "I wish we had; girls with brothers to fight their battles for them are more respected and better looked after than we, a whole host of lonely females, ever can be."

"I wish I was your brother, Nettie," suggested Ronald, and his glance and his tone were so gentle and pleading, that Nettie felt she must really either cry—or kiss him—or run away.

Acting on impulse, as was her wont, she chose the latter course, and considering the surroundings, this was certainly the wisest plan.

But as she hastily made her way towards the lawn-tennis party, Jonathan, pale and trembling, with an unwonted emotion, which seemed to make even his auburn locks stand on end, barred her progress.

"Oh Nettie, Nettie!" he cried, in the rashness of his

despair, "you have been encouraging that handsome idle vagabond to make love to you. It wasn't play, you weren't teazing, or laughing, or flirting, but you were whispering and looking into one another's eyes, and, oh dear! oh dear! —I hardly know what I am saying, but I'm too miserable, and I can't bear it and I won't, and I'll speak to your father, or Mary, or——"

"Here am I, Johnny; have you taken leave of your senses, my poor boy?" Mary asked, her calm methodical speech and gentle voice acting like a tranquillising spell on the rising fury and the spasmodic utterances of Curtis, who, reduced to sudden quietude and consequently to a feeling of intense shame at his late outburst, felt himself choking. He was powerless to speak and unwilling to make a still greater fool of himself in public; so, swallowing his anger, his humiliation, and the consequent tears, he turned from the ladies with a silent inclination of his head, and rapidly made his way out of the Gardens, disappearing through the Grove gate.

Nettie, so much surprised and dismayed by this sudden and utterly unexpected demonstration on good, simple Johnny Pry's part, that she herself was actually reduced to absolute silence, approached her eldest sister, and merely entreated, "Take me home with you, Polly darling."

But as they were walking away arm-in-arm, Nettie could not resist glancing at the bench where he who had desired to be "her brother" had been seated.

He was there no longer. Then, furtively, and very anxious that Mary should not suspect her intention, the

Baby ventured to peep over her sister's shoulder at that group among the trees at the far end of the Gardens. Hilda was still its centre, and Mrs. Toegoode was there, and Estella, and Mrs. Vivian, and Mr. Latimer—but Ronald—no—Ronald was *not* by Hilda's side yet, and, suddenly brightening, Nettie cried:

"Come, Poll, we won't go and shut ourselves up indoors, just because Johnny Pry has chosen to make an idiot of himself. We'll go and have a good game; dear Dosie is longing to have her revenge for a private grievance, and I'll give her the chance now, at once."

Mary was so accustomed to treat Nettie and her varying moods like those of the baby she still called and considered her fair young sister, that she was not in the least surprised to see her making frantic efforts to arrange a *parti*, efforts in which Mr. Latimer was, as usual, ready and eager to lend her every assistance.

Perceiving Mrs. Braun seated in solitary state, that ever new blue-worsted stocking in her hand, Mary went and took her place by the cheerful old lady's side, and these two began cosily chatting together.

Mrs. Braun acquainted Mary with Hilda's intended departure, and also hinted, in strict confidence, of course, that her dear Dosie, she thought, had given her heart to Mr. Latimer, and naturally could not approve of a young and unprotected lady who asked for secret interviews with the man of her (Dosie's) choice.

All this was news, and somewhat startling news, to Mary; but a greater surprise for both Mrs. Braun and

herself was the sight which now met their astonished gaze.

Mr. Latimer had left the tennis-net, and was slowly sauntering in the direction of Mrs. Vivian's garden, when that lady overtook him, and possessing herself of his hand, drew his arm confidingly around her supple waist.

"Mamma! oh mamma! do you see that?" cried Theodosia, for once quite oblivious of *les convenances*.

"That bad, bold, black-eyed American adventuress has decoyed him, has stolen him from us."

"No, Miss Braun, Mrs. Vivian is not quite so bad as that," said Nettie, who had closely followed Theodosia and heard her outcry. "Mr. Latimer has asked Mrs. Vivian to marry him, and she has just told me that they are *engaged!*"

CHAPTER XXIV.

SCENES.

A SMALL note addressed in a large slanting scrawl and marked "Immediate!" was handed to Estella, as she, with her sisters, entered their house soon after these very startling occurrences in the Gardens, which fortunately for the persons chiefly concerned, and most especially for hysterical Theodosia, had taken place in the far-away corner near the large sheltering tree, which to Estella must ever be associated with tenderest recollections now.

The majority of the Grenfellians severally occupied in

the manner most congenial to them, and, as usual, keeping towards the croquet end of the oval, were quite unaware that anything unusual had happened, while the tennis party coolly consoled themselves for the sudden break-up of their game by making derogatory remarks on the ridiculous affectations of Miss Braun, who was always crying out about some imaginary grievance. Then the baffled players animadverted on the stuck-uppishness of that Miss Norman, who did not come out to play like the rest of them, but sat apart with her needlework, keeping a watchful eye on her giddy young sisters, and probably thinking ill-natured things of all those who joined in the social games.

All these kind speeches were due to Mary's prompt action on Mrs. Braun's behalf.

Seeing the pitiable state of affairs, and quite aware of the overwhelming ridicule to which "poor dear Dosie" was exposing herself, Mary determined to assign some plausible reason for Miss Braun's sudden retirement from the scene of action. She therefore calmly stated that Miss Miller's ball had inadvertently hit Miss Braun, who was in great pain, and would be unable to continue the game.

Mary had spoken at random, anxious only to give Theodosia the chance of escaping with her mother. But Miss Miller happened to be a careless player, and was quite aware that her random stroke *might* have caused the accident, which she therefore resented as a personal affront.

These minor details did not trouble Mary, who had

at least succeeded in avoiding a still greater public scandal by hurrying the Brauns and her sisters indoors. The note handed to Estella and marked "Immediate!" was from Mrs. Toegoode, and ran thus:

"You will greatly oblige me by not mentioning the relationship existing between Miss Trevor and myself. A matter of family prejudice necessitates my making this request, which kindly convey to the signorina also. Miss Trevor is at home this evening, and if you and Miss Hilda like to look in at No. 25, all might be satisfactorily settled at once. I suggest this as your friend appeared so anxious about the matter.

"P.S.—I shall expect you to-morrow morning with more notes for the novel, and an account of what you settle to-night."

The immediate result of this note, which Estella took round to Hilda, was the visit of that lady to Miss Trevor, of 25, Grenfell Street.

Mary, in accordance with Estella's suggestion, consented to accompany the signorina, and further agreed to conduct the practical part of the interview. During their walk Hilda unhesitatingly confided all the doubts which were perplexing her to Mary, who listened to this recital with the closest attention, though perhaps not as sympathetically as the speaker might have desired.

Having carefully weighed Hilda's ingenuous confession in the well-regulated balance of her mind, Mary, actuated

by the good sense and proper pride which were allowed to be her distinguishing qualities, declared her cordial admiration for the prompt and independent action Hilda had taken in this matter.

"It is always questionable policy on the part of an unmarried woman to place herself under personal obligations to a bachelor," Mary affirmed.

"In future I hope you will allow me to help you in any arrangements you are making, in which you require advice or assistance. You may rely on my willingness to be of use to you as far as I am able."

Hilda was greatly comforted and reassured by this marked approval of quiet Mary's, of whom the Italian stood in considerable awe.

They found Miss Trevor to be a gentle sad-faced lady, who suggested a troubled past rather than any active interest in a colourless present.

Her house was simply furnished, and without any pretension save to strict order and cleanliness.

If those were, as they appeared to be, the lares and penates in this modest establishment, Miss Trevor certainly performed the rites required of her with scrupulous exactitude. She was prepared to give up both drawing-rooms to the signorina, merely suggesting that a better piano would be a desideratum, as the lady was musical.

"And my constant practising will cause no annoyance to you, madam?" Hilda considerately inquired, other preliminaries being satisfactorily settled by Mary.

Miss Trevor made no protestations as to her admiration

for, or delight in, music; she answered the signorina by a simple negative.

"You have no other lodgers, I presume?" Miss Norman inquired, just by way of saying something as she rose to take her leave.

She had spoken with perfect indifference, but both she and Hilda were struck by the sudden change in Miss Trevor's pale face and passive manner as she suddenly flushed and eagerly turned towards her interlocutor, whose surprised glance she met with something very like fear in her own.

"I am sure you will pardon me, ladies," she said, after a moment's hesitation, and she now for the first time spoke with eagerness, which, however, soon dwindled away again into the passive indifference of tone and manner with which she had received them. "Perhaps I ought to have mentioned," she said, "that an unfortunate relative resides with me—a widow. It is on her account I proposed that the signorina should have her meals in her own apartment. Mrs. Ashe is disfigured—painfully disfigured by smallpox. She dreads being seen by strangers, and I would seek to spare anyone from so distressing a sight."

"The poor unhappy lady!" cried Hilda compassionately. "It may be that her life is most tranquil and dull, perhaps she will like that we meet at times; she will certainly never need to have any fear of showing herself to me, and I shall hope to make a friend of her to-morrow."

Mrs. Ashe, keeping watch on the upper landing, heard the signorina's last words, which were spoken as she reached the hall-door.

"God bless her for her sweet voice and her sweet thoughts too!" moaned the unhappy widow, whose blurred distorted face certainly made her an object of compassion, if not of loathing, to her fellow-creatures.

"Did you hear what that good-hearted signorina said, Ada?" asked Miss Trevor, finding Mrs. Ashe sobbing on the landing above.

"Yes, and I mean to deserve her kindness too; I do indeed, aunt, indeed."

"If you will only consent to bear your trouble patiently and make the best of your life now, yes, even *now*—I shall feel that God the Almighty has shown his mercy to both of us, and that my reward for what little good I have done for you has come to me even in this world." Miss Trevor spoke humbly, reverently, her pure pale face typical of that patient resignation which was embodied in her daily life.

"You shall have your reward, poor dear," said Mrs. Ashe confidently, "even as I am having mine." She pointed to her ruined features as she spoke.

Once they had been beautiful, and even now Ada had the greatest difficulty in reconciling herself to the loss of the gift she had valued above all others. But her beauty had not brought happiness to herself, and had caused much misery to others.

It was the mild ambition of Miss Trevor's life to teach her refractory niece the superior value of mental over physical beauty.

While this pathetic scene was being enacted in the new home to which Hilda intended migrating on the morrow,

an interview of a very different nature was taking place in the house she was now most impatient to leave.

Theodosia, supported by her distressed parent, had returned from the Gardens convulsed by hysterical sobs, the outcome of baffled affection, furious jealousy, and impotent rage.

Poor Mrs. Braun, who had never witnessed such a violent demonstration on her dear Dosie's part before, was herself quite overwhelmed by the nature of this catastrophe. Vinegar, eau-de-cologne, water, brandy, salts of various kinds, and even burnt feathers were applied to the nostrils, the temples, or the lips of the shrieking patient, the promiscuous use of these quasi-restoratives being considered as absolutely necessary by the excited and sympathetic maids who volunteered assistance, and the narration of varied personal experiences in about equal proportions.

It was a wearingly long time before poor Dosie finally lapsed into something like tranquillity, her violent shrieks dwindling down into plaintive sobs and moans.

"I love him so—oh dear mamma! I love him so; and I would have been such a good, such a devoted wife to him, and now—and now——"

Thus she complained, laying her weary head upon her good old mother's faithful breast, and in her despair turning for comfort and consolation to the parent whom at all other times she was so ready to snub and ridicule.

"It is for Mrs. Vivian's money he is making his court to her, mine Dosie," Mrs. Braun suggested, by way of accounting for Latimer's perversity.

"But I have money, too!" cried Theodosia, raising herself from the sofa on which she had been placed; "and mine is in Consols—safe and sure, while hers is in American mines and railways, and trash of that sort, and may all be lost to-morrow. I only wish and hope it has all been swallowed up this very day by some rash transatlantic speculation of hers—bold, bad, black, designing, old widow woman!"

"Mr. Latimer, hearing Miss Braun was taken ill in the Gardens, has just come in to know if he can be of any assistance, ma'am," said the parlour-maid, and stood at the door awaiting her mistress's reply.

"Is my hair disarranged?" asked Theodosia, flushing; and anxious to see for herself, jumped up from the sofa and hurried across to the looking-glass. "Bring me down my powder-box and a hair-brush, Simpson," she said; and turning towards her mother, begged her to lower the blinds. "I don't want him to see that I have been crying," she said, by way of explanation.

"But you surely will not at all see him?" cried Mrs. Braun in consternation.

"Certainly I will, and at once, and alone!" answered Theodosia. "The girl Hilda is allowed to solicit private interviews—why should not I?"

"Do not—pray do not let him know of your weakness, Dosie, mine poor dear Dosie," implored Mrs. Braun, who with all her indulgent good-nature, had some strict notions on the reserve becoming to a *junges Mädchen.*

In Mrs. Braun's vocabulary all unmarried women were "young girls."

Presently Mr. Latimer entered the drawing-room, the lowered blinds of which shut out the already dying light of day.

"You have been ill, I hear. A ball struck you. Were you really hurt?" he said, advancing towards the couch on which Theodosia was still gracefully reclining.

"Your hands are very feverish," he added, having taken them tenderly into his cool ones. "I am much distressed, and beg you will reassure me as to the nature of the injury you received."

Instead of replying to this anxious inquiry, Theodosia said, in a voice which she succeeded in controlling:

"I believe I am to congratulate you, Mr. Latimer, on your engagement to Mrs. Vivian?"

"Spare me that irony!" cried he, fervently pressing the hands he had never relinquished.

And in another moment he was on his knees by her side, his noble head hidden in the ample folds of her silk skirt, his huge body convulsed—yes, actually convulsed—with grief.

Brokenly, amid his sobs, his face still discreetly concealed, he confessed to Theodosia that he loved her, and her only, but that necessity had compelled him to accept some pecuniary assistance from Mrs. Vivian at a moment when he was greatly embarrassed.

It was at that time that Mrs. Vivian had further proposed to solve all further difficulties by entering into a matrimonial alliance with him, which would cancel all his obligations.

"And you have loved me all this weary heart-breaking time?" cried Theodosia rapturously.

His fond embrace and the kiss he impressed on her trembling lips was more than sufficient answer for her.

She had always felt he loved her—always known it, and she was so happy—"Oh! so happy now!"

Latimer seated himself by her side, drew her towards him, kissed her cheek, and asked her if she would grant him a favour. As if there was anything she could refuse him now?

The Anti-Bee scheme was "flourishing magnificently," he said, the money he owed Mrs. Vivian would soon be repaid; but until that debt was discharged, he must not, he dare not, think of securing his happiness by making Theodosia his wife, or even by declaring the engagement which now of course was binding on her as well as on himself.

"Then we must keep it secret for awhile, just for a little while?" whispered Theodosia anxiously.

He told her secrecy was imperative until he had freed himself from the debt and the engagement to Mrs. Vivian, which at present were embarrassing him to a most painful extent.

"Would a thousand pounds help you out of your difficulty?" whispered Theodosia, leaning her head against his shoulder and timidly pressing her lips on his ear as she spoke.

"Ah! do not let any considerations of a mercantile nature interfere in this our first happy hour of mutually

acknowledged love," he cried earnestly, and again fell on his knees before this "tender, sweet, generous, and most devoted of women."

In that delicious moment of her triumphant love, Theodosia would gladly—gladly have handed him over the entire fortune which, by her father's will, she had held in her own right since her twenty-fifth birthday, now some fifteen years ago.

It was well for her, though perhaps not for her lover, that her fortune had been so closely tied up that she could not touch a penny of it without going through endless legal formalities.

She laid her hand upon his silky white hair, confessed that she had always thought it "so beautiful," pressed her lips upon it, with a sigh bade him rise, and added: "You will not mind my telling *our* mamma, dear Peregrine, will you?"

But Peregrine did mind, and very emphatically impressed this fact on Dosie, who began to tremble as he knitted his brows and spoke in that stern tone which had already terrified her more than once.

"If you cannot be silent for a time, only a short time, Dosie darling," he said, when he saw how his severity had alarmed her, "you will ruin our chances of future happiness, by compelling me to sell myself to Mrs. Vivian, and thus cancelling my debt and obligation."

Then Theodosia solemnly declared that she would be absolutely silent.

All she asked for was his continued love, and the occasional assurance of it when they were alone together.

CHAPTER XXV.

INDEPENDENCE.

"I HAVE read your manuscript with the greatest attention, Miss Estella," said St. Helier, rising to receive the young authoress as she came towards him on the morning following their first clandestine interview, and laid her hand in his with a beaming smile.

She was as radiant as the glorious summer morning, of which she appeared to St. Helier as the incarnation.

He had thought a great deal about her charming face, her still more charming manner, and her varied talents too, since their previous interview. And he had paced his room both last night and this morning, tormented by his restless anxiety as to whether or not she *would* dare to come into the Gardens, as he had implored her to do.

Now she stood before him, sparkling with health and content, and he felt not only joyful but most sincerely grateful to her for the intense pleasure her presence there was causing him.

Old Santarelli's letter, and the enigma suggested by Hilda's conduct, had still perplexed him a little during the morning, but now that he saw Estella face to face it seemed to him that this was the only woman in the world worth thinking about at all.

"Have you really taken the trouble to look at this?"

she said, seizing her manuscript with that irrepressible eagerness with which one recovers a missing treasure.

"Indeed I have done far more than look at it," he replied earnestly, "I have read every word most attentively——"

"And what do you think of it?" she cried, unable to conceal her growing anxiety.

"I think it is excellent," said he, "absolutely original, fresh in style, fresh in ideas, simple and wholesome. I sincerely congratulate you on what I consider a very interesting and remarkably well-written story."

"You call it a story?" queried Estella. "Doesn't it deserve the title of a novel?"

"You wish me to speak candidly?" he asked.

"Or not at all," she answered decisively, and met his earnest gaze bravely with hers.

"There is not plot enough for such a novel as would suit the requirements of the day," he said, and said it deprecatingly, so anxious was he to avoid causing her the slightest pain.

"By plot I suppose you mean fraud, or murder, or bigamy, or other dreadful violences of that sort?" asked Estella in a disappointed tone.

"I will show you what I mean presently," said he; "and I do not doubt that you will understand me. I have ventured to write out some notes, tracing a skeleton plot, as it were, and if you should approve of my suggestion, you can easily clothe it all in your own pleasing and effective language.

"You are very good, and I thank you," she said; but she evidently was quite unable to appreciate the nature of the service he had done her at this moment.

She was still too much mortified to find her mind's firstborn was not considered perfect, to be able to regard its possible successor with anything but disfavour.

"I endeavoured to write quite simply," she explained, "and truthfully to tell the story of my heroine's country life as I myself have lived it.

"I know nothing of plot, or horrors, or villains, and evil machinations; and how could I possibly write of things quite out of the narrow circle of my experience?——I will not err a second time by asking you about the plots in *your* life," she added, with a dawning smile at the recollection of their first interview in the Gardens, which now seemed to her to have happened years instead of months ago.

"And you disdain my attempt at suggestion?" he asked, drawing a folded paper from his pocket.

"Indeed no; and I am sure, when I have got over this silly feeling of disappointment and mortification, and am in my right senses again, I shall heartily thank you for it."

She took the paper from his hand as she spoke in a very dejected tone; and he, glancing up at her erst so happy face, saw tears glistening on her long dark lashes.

"I have made you unhappy!" he cried, conscience-stricken; "oh why did I speak as I thought!"

"Because I asked you to do so," she answered, and

smiled as she spoke. "I was foolish," she continued, smiling still; "I wished to accomplish straight away what others spend years of thought, and study, and endless trouble in achieving. I quite understand now what Mrs. Toegoode meant when she said that a literary career was a continual struggle, and that a certain apprenticeship must be served, and a definite routine had to be followed before one could aspire to success."

"In some respects Adela-ida's opinions are mine also," said St. Helier; "but she was not speaking of your individual case, of which she can have known nothing."

"No, her remarks were general," Estella admitted.

"And your case is peculiar," said he; "you are richly endowed by Nature to start with. You have keen powers of observation, a sense of humour which is unusual in a woman, and a remarkable facility for clothing your ideas in most effective language."

She brightened wonderfully again as she listened to this encouraging speech, which fell like balm upon her wounded spirit. He saw and rejoiced in the effect of his last words.

"I am so grateful to you for coming out this morning," he began, changing his tone also as he dropped the now vexed question of her authorship.

"Ah, and you are *here*, Estella!" exclaimed Hilda, suddenly appearing before her friends, who were far too much engrossed in one another's words and looks to have thoughts or eyes for what was happening about them. "You seem quite alarmed," she added laughing, "and regard me as if I was a bogie—bogie it is called, isn't it?—instead of

a very prosaic young woman who walked over the gravel path in the most unromantic manner. Nettie told me you were with Mrs. Toegoode, Estella," the signorina added, almost apologetically, as she became convinced by the embarrassed looks and the odd silence of these two that her presence was irksome to them.

"I was on my way to Mrs. Toegoode, with whom I have an appointment," said Estella, and her voice and manner struck Hilda as strangely constrained. "I hope you will excuse me; I should not like to keep Mrs. Toegoode waiting," she added, trying to regain possession of her manuscript, which St. Helier again held in his hand. As she touched it he clasped it the more resolutely, and she dared not demand it from him, lest Hilda should suspect that it had been given to him at a previous interview.

St. Helier was keenly alive to the situation, and quite understood the nature and extent of Estella's embarrassment. He rejoiced in it, more especially as he still retained possession of that precious manuscript, and therefore felt quite convinced that Estella on some future occasion would yet again *dare* to come and demand its restitution from him.

These were his pleasant reflections as he watched her tripping lightly away over the grass, and making straight for Mrs. Toegoode's garden entrance. He smiled at his thoughts, but Hilda, who had just taken the place so suddenly vacated by Estella, did not smile at all. She was considerably troubled and perplexed.

Estella was so strange, so cold, so unsympathetic to-day,

and yet last night they had parted on such excellent terms. Were all the Englishwomen fickle and capricious, and unreliable, blowing hot friendship one day and cold nonchalance the next?

Or was Estella, like Theodosia, herself in the wrong, and was it the consciousness of her own breach of faith which had caused her to speak so distantly, so unkindly to the injured person? That such had been Theodosia's practice, Hilda had unfortunately learnt to her cost; but Estella?—no, Estella was cast in a far nobler mould than the soured spinster at No. 39; and thus reassuring herself, Hilda felt quite convinced that Estella would not have disclosed any of those novel plans for the future to St. Helier, since Hilda had so particularly desired he should not be troubled about her affairs any more.

His first words convinced her of his absolute ignorance of the events which had made the last two days so very important to her.

"Signor Scuro came to me yesterday," said St. Helier, "and told me that Lord Goselyngge desired to pay you a visit in the double capacity of a humble admirer, as well as the discriminating chief of the Great Diamond Opera."

"In the latter, or professional capacity, he did come to me yesterday," said Hilda, more elated than she would have cared to confess by the sudden interest her words had aroused in St. Helier's face.

He looked at her with a keenly-searching glance, as he asked: "And he made you some proposition about singing for him?"

"More than that," said Hilda; "he offered me the chance of a *début* in his theatre next month.

"I have acceded to his terms, or his stipulations—what should I say?—and the agreement will be dutifully signed to-morrow."

"But my dear child," cried St. Helier, somewhat aghast at these surprising revelations, "how could you possibly have undertaken to settle such an affair—a regular business matter—without sending for or coming to consult me?"

Hilda was gratified beyond measure by the result of her new tactics.

Two nights ago she had plainly perceived that St. Helier had no desire whatever to be troubled any further about her affairs, and to-day, at the very moment in which he discovered that she had taken an important step without first consulting him, he began to protest, and was evidently very much interested in her plans.

He himself was perfectly aware of the incongruity of his proceedings.

He had felt that the fact of his assuming any kind of control of guardianship of the lonely signorina had compromised them both in the eyes of others, and yet he no sooner found her acting independently than he resented her doing so, as though she were thus causing him some grievous injury.

"You must allow me to look over the legal document to which you intend to affix your signature to-morrow," he said, after some consideration.

"I am sorry that I can *not*," she said, better pleased by

his impatient manner and his frowning looks than by any verbose compliments he could have paid her.

His dismay proved that he still cared about her.

If she had become as indifferent to him as Theodosia and circumstances had led her to believe, he would have rejoiced in every fact which drove her to decide on an independent course likely to sever all connection between them.

"And pray what can induce you to say that you can *not* allow me to guard you from being unduly inveigled into signing some agreement which may perhaps bind you irrevocably, while it leaves the other side free and quit of all responsibility?"

"Mr. Latimer has kindly consented to look after my portion of this agreement," said Hilda very seriously; but in her heart she was again rejoicing over the charming results of her lately adopted line of action.

St. Helier was more than dismayed now; he was furious.

"What business has Mr. Latimer to trouble himself about your private affairs?" he asked hoarsely; "it seems to me that that gentleman is far too fond of meddling in matters which concern him not at all."

"In this case your blame is certainly undeserved on his part," said Hilda, warming generously on behalf of the absentee. "It is by my particular request that Mr. Latimer has undertaken to settle all the business preliminary with Giacomo Arrowsmith, his lordship's factotum."

"Then I may conclude that Mr. Latimer fills a corresponding *rôle vis-à-vis* the Signorina Santarelli?" St. Helier said, rising and bowing coldly.

"Here is Mr. Latimer to speak for himself," cried Hilda, also rising to meet the silver-haired Adonis, on whom the thoughts of two of the Lady Grenfellians were so tenderly concentrated already.

"Pray, let him speak for himself, and for you and to you, as much as you please," said St. Helier, turning away; "but pardon me if I cannot remain as a listener."

He really took his leave as he spoke, and all the enjoyment died out of Hilda's face and out of her spirit as she watched him hastily striding away towards the little gate, and making his exit thence.

She had carried the triumphant joke of her independence too far. He was offended, he had left her in anger; and this very day she was going among strangers again, this time without his approval, without his co-operation, without his knowledge even.

"Noon on a broiling summer's day is a strange hour for us three to be out in the recreation-ground," cried Latimer advancing, and flinging himself down upon the seat St. Helier had so hurriedly vacated on his account. Latimer was grateful for the resting-place thus prepared for him; how it happened to be so opportunely at his disposal he neither knew nor cared.

"I thought you would wish us to be very particular about all the items connected with the agreement before you are

bound by it, signorina," he presently continued, "and so I have called upon my lawyer on your behalf, and 'made assurance doubly sure' where you are concerned."

"Thank you. I feel that my case is quite safe in your experienced care," said Hilda.

"I am surprised and grieved to hear that you intend leaving our happy circle at Madame Braun's," he remarked regretfully; "I hope you are not going far away."

She told him of the arrangements made for her by Miss Norman.

"I could have wished, for your sake and that of the charming and sociable Mrs. Vivian, that you would have accepted her oft-repeated invitation, and gone to stay with her, at least for a time."

"Is it true that that lady is your *fiancée*, Mr. Latimer?" asked Hilda, who suddenly remembered what she had heard, "and may I congratulate you?"

"Hush, I pray you," he whispered nervously, and his alarmed glance in the direction of No. 39 betrayed the reason of his fears. "We desire to keep the matter secret just at present, for the sake of Ronald, and for other family considerations."

Hilda listened, vaguely amused at this sudden desire to suppress a fact which Mrs. Vivian herself had unhesitatingly announced on the previous day.

"The fact is, I have come out now to offer matutinal homage to my queen," Latimer continued with unabated nervousness. "But, as the engagement must be kept secret *pro tem.*, I am particularly anxious that Miss—Miss

Theodosia should not know you met me on my way to Mrs. Vivian's."

"You may rest assured of my discretion," said Hilda smiling, and really amused at the fact that this sturdy giant should actually quail before the possible displeasure of that unhappy cross-grained spinster, Theodosia.

"It is time for me to go in now," said the signorina, rising. "I will say *au revoir* to you, Mr. Latimer."

"We meet at your new residence to-morrow?"

"At twelve o'clock, if you please," said she, and turned to go.

"And you will quite forget that you have seen me this morning," he resumed, detaining her.

"My mind is a blank as far as you are concerned," she replied, and left him to keep his appointment with the Shoddy-Princess, while she made her way for the last time to the home of the confiding spinster, who firmly believed that she alone was the arbiter of Peregrine Latimer's much-coveted allegiance.

CHAPTER XXVI.

MONEY AND HONEY.

HILDA SANTARELLI, with her brunette complexion and dark eyes, was not an ideal Gretchen according to stage tradition; but the girlish simplicity of her bearing, her

frank smile, and a certain thrilling pathos in her glorious voice, adapted her admirably for the successful performance of the *rôle* of Gounod's unfortunate *prima donna*.

As Margherita in opera, Hilda was likely, ay sure, to excel.

So said and thought her friends and her admirers, the circle of whom had been considerably enlarged since the signorina's social *début* at the Countess of Dewminster's.

The dowager herself had called upon the signorina on two occasions, accompanied by her son Benjamin. He came because he hoped to meet Miss Estella Norman again, who, he understood, was very often in the company of the Italian lady, for whom she had avowed her affection to him on the night of their first meeting.

How happy the reflected glory of the countess's visits would have made Miss Braun if her ladyship's ancient but coroneted barouche had stopped at the door of No. 39. But since Hilda no longer dwelt there the honour of her ladyship's visits was transferred to the unimportant dwellings of Grenfell Street, the quiet inhabitants of which no doubt regarded the lordly equipage with wonder and awe.

Mr. Raynewater's desire was gratified on the occasion of her ladyship's second visit to the signorina. Estella happened to be with her friend that afternoon, and while the dowager was entreating Hilda to be sure and secure her ladyship a box for the night of her *début*, a petition which the guileless Italian accepted as a personal compliment instead of a selfish economy, Mr. Raynewater

thoroughly enjoyed the complete monopoly of Estella, whom he found even more charming during this chance interview than on the night of the grand At-Home.

He was, indeed, so fascinated by the girl's beauty and wit that he emphatically declared to his mother that "that Miss Norman was the only lady he had set eyes on since his return to England whom he would be proud to call his wife."

"Don't talk nonsense, Ben," her ladyship replied with a good-natured smile. "You must marry money."

"Money be ——."

What money might be, according to the Honourable Benjamin, who was no longer in a good temper, need not be recorded.

"Make that old toady of yours, Mrs. Adela-ida, find out all the particulars of this young lady's parentage and expectations, mother," suggested Benjamin presently. "I never saw such jolly rebellious hair as she has, or such a saucy pair of laughing eyes. Upon my soul, I'd even accept some lucrative appointment for her sake, if they'd pay me enough to enable me to keep a wife and a comfortable establishment."

The dowager was really alarmed when she heard her idle son make such an enterprising declaration. She knew then that Miss Estella must have made a far deeper impression on his susceptible heart than she had previously had any idea of. To think of her spoilt, lazy little Ben talking of earning his living! Faith, she had heard, could move mountains; love, she might soon affirm, had a still

greater power, if it induced her younger son to become industrious.

"Let us talk to Honey Latimer about putting me in the way of making money, mother," Benjamin suggested, when they arrived at home after that visit to Grenfell Street, where the arch glance of the charmer had revived all the luckless youth's slumbering passion.

Honey Latimer was talked to by mother and son, and agreed to make a little fortune for them both if they would consent to his investing a moderate sum for them, say £500, in shares in the Great Anti-Bee scheme.

"I quite expect to treble your original outlay and return it to you with the profits in three months' time," he said confidently. "The shares are going up every day now; we can scarcely allot them fast enough. There is such a run on the Company since the public have begun to appreciate the money-yielding possibilities of our scheme."

"I am glad you are not such a fool as to talk philanthropy and that sort of cant to us, Mr. Latimer," the countess remarked, with a hearty laugh. "For my own part, I'm not at all ashamed to declare that I care a vast deal more about making ready money, and plenty of it for myself, than I do about the feeding of the vulgar million with that honey which they are suddenly supposed to find so very delectable."

The result of young Benjamin's growing passion and consequent ambition was the yielding of the £500 which Latimer had so generously undertaken to treble, and the

frequent presence of the Honourable Mr. Raynewater in the social recreation-ground at those hours in which the ladies were wont to make their appearance in the Gardens.

Why he came there so frequently now, and whose company he sought, was not long a secret to the Grenfellians, the female section of whom speedily became jealous of the distinction thus accorded to Estella Norman, and were not slow now in finding faults in that young lady's appearance and manners, which had never been suspected until Mr. Raynewater's attentions made her so very conspicuous.

Mr. Latimer, the claims on whose time had increased in exact proportion to the rapidly-extending operations of the wonderful Anti-Bee Company, was seldom seen either in the Gardens or at No. 39 now.

"I am making money, making money for *us* now, as fast as I can," he told Dosie, when she, tenderly clinging to him, pathetically inquired how long, how much longer this terrible ordeal of secrecy was to be endured? She had soon induced him to confide to her that the sum Mrs. Vivian had lent him was two thousand pounds.

Within a week of this startling confession Theodosia for the first time went up to Mr. Latimer's study and timidly knocked at the door of the small room reserved for his private use at the top of the house.

No sooner had he admitted her, and somewhat harshly remonstrated with her for running such wild risks as this unprecedented visit, than she, after passionately asserting that no one had the slightest suspicion of their engagement,

or of her present visit to her beloved, told him that she had gone to her trustee and with him to her lawyer's and obtained possession of one thousand pounds out of the ten, which constituted her fortune.

"You shall have the money to-morrow, my dearest best Peregrine," she cried breathlessly, as she extricated herself from his passionate embrace. "As you are doing so well now, I am sure you will soon be able to double this sum, and then you will be free, and this odious secrecy can end with your payment of the debt into which that horrid designing Shoddy-Princess managed to inveigle you, with the sole object of getting you into her jealous clutches."

At this impartial version of his relations with Mrs. Vivian, Latimer laughed heartily, and Dosie joined in his boisterous merriment with a right good will too.

"With your consent I shall invest your thousand pounds in Anti-Bee shares, my sweet generous Dosie," he said, after a little consideration. "Your name, in which the shares shall be taken, will be sure to bring us luck.

"The sum you thus invest will probably be doubled within a month and still be yours."

"Only to hand back to you again, my beloved," she said, stooping to kiss him as he sat at his writing-table.

But he at this moment was too much engrossed by mercantile considerations to respond warmly to her blandishments, for he now drew forth a number of papers, some written, some printed lists of names and figures, and

finally a huge official prospectus and sundry minutes of the Great Anti-Bee Company.

All these documents he spread out before Theodosia, carefully marking and explaining their manifold intricacies, and exhaustively answering all her inquiries, the shrewdness and perspicacity of which, he declared, "delighted as well as surprised him."

Theodosia for her part was greatly delighted too. She felt that she had just been personally elected as a member of that Aristocracy of speculative enterprise which made English men and English women too (?) the proudest as well as the wealthiest of the rulers of commerce.

She certainly looked ten years younger after this eminently satisfactory interview with her lover, and went tripping downstairs with quite a girlish exuberance of spirits.

She was even singing "Tra-la-la-la-la!" and laughing gaily as she entered the linen-room, in the commodious presses of which the thrifty *Hausfrau* was storing away some of those heaps of fine linen which she had brought from her parental home with her, in accordance with the good old German notion of what a handsome dowry should be.

The mother turned round, surprised at her daughter's jubilant voice and dancing step.

"Mine Dosie, what it is?" she cried.

Then Dosie, without volunteering any explanation, put her arm around her mother's neck and kissed her affectionately on both cheeks.

"We are ever so much better off by ourselves, without that howling and flirting Italian woman," Miss Braun remarked presently.

"I am so glad if you are happy, mine dear Dosie, but I do feel you are liddel hard to that innocent signorina, who really is a goot and quite a harmless girl, and whose singing was certainly the most fine we have ever any of us heard before. I am sure Mr. Lat—Mr. *Curtis*, I mean" (the old lady hastily substituted the latter name as she saw a suspicious gleam in her daughter's eyes), "Mr. Curtis is in quite a melancholy state since Miss Hilda has left us. Have you not noticed that he is so quiet and so sad, Dosie? what can be ailing this poor young man?"

"Perhaps he is in love," suggested Dosie; "but no, he would be happy in that case," she added, with the conviction of one who thoroughly understood her subject.

"I think it is some business with him and Mr. Latimer," said Mrs. Braun a little anxiously; "those two are no longer such thick friends as they used to be before Mr. Latimer spent so much of his time in the City, as he has to do since he has this fresh and great appointment."

"Jonathan Curtis has served his apprenticeship under Mr. Norman's slow old-fashioned *régime*," exclaimed Theodosia loftily. "He is quite behind the times, and can't enter into the spirit of enterprise which characterises the present state of commerce, and so he and Mr. Latimer, who has a master-mind, differ on many points, and can't be expected to pull together"

"You speak like a book, mine Dosie darling," said her

mother proudly. "If I had as much talents in my finger as you can spare from your great mind, I would go in business myself and make a great fortune too."

"Suppose I were to try instead, dear mamma?" said Theodosia coaxingly, and her mother, finding the "child" very lovable in this pretty playful mood, contented herself by smiling fondly, and declaring that it was "a most great pleasure to find her Dosie making fun and jokes."

"It will be a still greater pleasure when I have realised the fortune in earnest," thought Theodosia, and ran away to the piano, anxious to vent her overflowing spirits in jubilant dance-music and brilliant capriccios.

Good-natured old Mrs. Braun was perfectly justified in her comments on the change in the relations between Mr. Latimer and his quondam disciple and adorer Johnny Pry.

That unfortunate young man, to whom life had hitherto always worn a very bright and hopeful prospect, had of late suffered acutely, and through the persons he had most loved and esteemed in all the world.

What cruel pangs he endured on account of Nettie has been told already, nor did her subsequent indifference towards him at all reconcile him to the fact that the only smiles he now saw upon her pretty face were called forth by the presence of his rival.

That Ronald was his rival, and his fortunate rival, poor Jonathan constantly repeated to himself now, but no

amount of repetition made the distressing fact easier to credit or pleasanter to realise.

And now another private grievance was added to Jonathan's growing anxieties, by the strange conduct of Peregrine Latimer, of whose novel speculation in the City startling accounts came to the ever-ready ears of Johnny, whose intensely inquisitive nature compelled him to pry into and listen for the minutest details of any transaction in which persons of his acquaintance were engaged.

It was not a noble pursuit, but it certainly had one redeeming feature in Jonathan's case. He was never actuated by ill-nature, he was always more distressed than pleased when ill-tidings came to his knowledge, and he was now making himself perfectly miserable because he heard such very disadvantageous accounts of Mr. Latimer's much-vaunted Anti-Bee scheme.

At first the notion of honey manufactured by steam had been pooh-poohed and utterly ridiculed as out of all reasonable question. But lately the enterprise, backed by capital and pushed by such very enterprising men as Sir Fulsome Venture and Mr. Peregrine Latimer, was really beginning to assume considerable proportions, and Jonathan's chief anxiety was that Latimer might induce Mr. Norman to join the speculation, which the honorary secretary certainly had a marvellous knack of painting in delusively bright colours.

That Mrs. Vivian possessed a very considerable number of shares Curtis had ascertained, and it had for a moment (an uncommonly selfish moment) occurred to him to wish

that Master Ronald also might have a nibble at this golden goose, and so lose his own nest-egg.

But in this ungenerous desire Jonathan was baffled, for Ronald was far too much engrossed by his sentimental anxieties to trouble in the least about his income, of which far more than he required for his modest manner of life was handed to him in regular quarterly instalments, as his late grandfather had arranged should be the order of things until his grandson reached his thirtieth year, when, if he chose to marry, the bulk of his fortune would be at his own disposal entirely.

Mary Norman was the only person to whom poor Jonathan was able to turn for sympathy and consolation in these his first weary days of trouble and perplexity. And Mary, who listened with unflagging interest and inexhaustible patience to the lengthy recital of Johnny's woes, certainly manifested a tenderer and a more lenient spirit on these occasions than any of her own people would have deemed her capable of.

Mary was really very much attached to Jonathan. She had known him since they were all children together in those happy simple Oakhurst days, when Mr. Norman, who went away to London and his business every day, would often take Johnny up to town with him to introduce him to his future home in the City. Johnny was Mr. Norman's ward, and an orphan, and he had always been looked upon as one of the family by the Norman girls, as well as by their father. Mary had bestowed quite maternal care on her small adopted brother, when first he

came to Oakhurst, after the death of his mother, and spent his holidays with Nettie as his chief playmate and companion.

He was but twelve years old then, and Nettie only ten, whereas Mary, who had just reached her fifteenth birthday, appeared to her juniors to be "quite grown-up," by reason of her few additional years.

In those happy bygone days, to which Mary often referred with quite a pathetic regret, she had been Johnny's chief protectress and unvaryingly kind friend, and this gentle interest on her part had not been changed by the lapse of years. She was quite as fond of "poor Johnny" now as she had been twelve years ago, and quite as ready to blame mischievous Nettie for teasing her adorer to-day as she used to be during the old struggles for supremacy in which Nettie usually came off victorious.

It was a wonderful comfort to Jonathan to find that the grave and sensible Miss Norman, who ruled her father's household with such wise discretion, was just as ready still to listen to his plaints and confidences as the kind girl friend of his lonely and loveless boyhood.

The very day following that very ill-advised display of his love and his jealousy in the Gardens, Mary had sought an opportunity of inviting the poor fellow's confidence, and ever since that time Johnny had come to her of his own accord, pouring his doubts and griefs and perplexities into her sympathetic ear, and gratefully striving to act as she advised him, for the best.

To worry Nettie at this moment would be worse than

useless, and could only serve to strengthen her liking for Ronald, which at present was but a passing fancy.

"If opposition is offered to her now she will turn obstinate," Mary declared, "whereas if she is left to 'gang her ain gait,' the chances are this budding affection will be blown away before it has even had time to take root."

Jonathan felt there was wisdom in these remarks, and resolved to prove himself as indifferent towards his adored one as she certainly set him the example of being by her own conduct towards him.

Estella knew very little of what was happening around her at this time. She was too entirely absorbed by her private anxieties, among the chief of which was the fact that she had gone out into the Gardens for three consecutive mornings, but had vainly awaited Mr. St. Helier, and the restitution of her manuscript.

The fact was that St. Helier had gladly availed himself of the valid excuse of a brief which necessitated his presence at Winchester Assizes to escape from town, from himself, and his conflicting passions. Those contradictory but all-engrossing thoughts, anent the authoress and the enigma, were really making his life a burden to him.

CHAPTER XXVII.

HILDA'S DÉBUT.

As Margherita it was finally decided by the authorities at the Diamond Opera House that Hilda should make her *début*.

Margherita's Jewel Song had in the first instance captivated Lord Goselyngge, when he listened to the signorina's rendering of it on the occasion of their first meeting.

Since then, scarcely a day had passed on which his lordship had not found some plausible pretext for an interview with his new *prima donna*.

The signorina's perfect simplicity charmed, just as her voice and her unconventionality fascinated him.

His acquaintance with *prime donne* had already been considerable, and he somewhat rudely declared them in the aggregate to be a "captious, conceited, lazy, and unreliable lot."

It was this detrimental opinion of his which induced him invariably to decline to have any personal dealings with professional ladies, whom it seemed to him quite impossible to please.

But with the gentle inexperienced Hilda, he found no such difficulty.

He was only too eager, as he knew her better, to discover some pretext for constantly seeing her.

"Business" was of course always a valid excuse, and one for which the girl considered it her bounden duty to waive all other considerations.

If Lord Goselyngge sent a note or a telegram desiring half-an-hour's conversation with her on business of importance, she felt that she was absolutely obliged either to be at home to receive him at the hour he had named, or to present herself at the theatre, if those were his orders.

It had not as yet occurred to her that she as the lady should assume the right to command his lordship. At present she regarded herself virtually as in his employ, and therefore her strong sense of duty dictated obedience to the master's orders.

It might be all the better if this sense of the relative duty between employé and employer were more generally understood and practised in all professions.

When his lordship's summons requested the signorina's appearance at the theatre, it was that she might be present at special rehearsals, which were called for her convenience on several occasions.

The stage here was so much larger than that of the small theatre in Rome, where her master of deportment had "drilled" her, that she must take every possible opportunity to familiarise herself with the large arena in which she was thenceforth "to show off her paces." It was thus his lordship more forcibly than elegantly put the case to her.

She accepted his manifold attentions graciously. That

of course. Courtesy was an instinct with her, which had, under her father's amiable supervision, been trained to an accomplishment. But it never occurred to her that the young lord's anxiety for her comfort and her convenience was unusual. It was on account of her voice and her successful *début* as an actress that he took so much trouble in visiting her to arrange preliminaries, and in giving her the benefit of those extra rehearsals.

That any feeling of personal admiration for her as a woman could be influencing her new and powerful friend and ally, was a thought which as yet had certainly never entered her mind.

She was, as discriminating old Mrs. Braun had so often declared, guileless, and also quite without personal vanity or conceit.

Her voice was a sacred treasure, a talent entrusted to her by the great Master of All.

A gift to be jealously guarded, and of which she had both right and reason to be proud.

She was at this time wholly absorbed by her desire to acquit herself honourably of her new undertaking, and to do credit to the man who was now giving her the first chance of taking her place in the honourable rank of aspiring artists. And she devoted her time and her thoughts wholly to the perfecting of the *rôle* in which she most earnestly desired to excel.

Mrs. Ashe, for whom Hilda from the first moment of their meeting had shown nought but tenderest consideration

and compassion, was urged by the signorina to accompany her, whenever she was compelled to attend rehearsals.

"You are too fearfully alone, your life is too monotone here," Hilda declared. "It would be quite a change for you to come with me, and cannot fail to do you great good in every way. It will be far more amusing for you surely, than the long walks you take with your aunt in the evening. You need not lift your veil, of course. It seems to be the mode in London for ladies to hide their faces altogether.

Miss Trevor, who was usually so reticent in the expression of any emotion, not only felt, but gratefully acknowledged the signorina's kindness in making this suggestion which she declared to be quite a feasible method of giving poor Ada a little glimpse of the brighter things which seemed to have so completely vanished out of her isolated life now.

So it was settled that Mrs. Ashe, her poor scarred face concealed by a thick veil of Maltese lace, which had the effect of a mask, should accompany the signorina on every possible occasion.

Lord Goselyngge did not at all approve of this black-faced chaperon. But when Hilda in her generous way explained the unfortunate widow's circumstances to him, he yielded with as good a grace as men do yield to the woman who, for the time being, is the one woman in the world to them.

At the theatre the signorina's Black Domino soon came to be the object of joking and derision, and this

unkind feeling was not lessened by the fact that Lord Goselyngge himself treated both the signorina and the Black Domino with marked courtesy and deference on all occasions.

This cavilling jealousy on the part of all the other singers, professional "ladies and gentlemen" being quite of one accord as to the scant mercy to be shown to an interloper, came to a climax the night before the signorina's *début*.

Up to this moment her position was insecure. She *might* fail to please the public, and it may without injustice be assumed that many of Hilda's professional sisters, and brothers too, earnestly desired that she should fail.

"There are too many in the field already," remarked one old stager, and that was the predominant feeling in the jealous breast of each of Hilda's captious critics.

"*I* (he or she, as the case might be) have a still smaller chance of advancement if this stranger, this novice, should succeed; and therefore I will do all I can to discourage, discomfit, and ridicule her, and that pretentious Black Domino of hers."

This was the spirit of welcome and encouragement for the novice behind the scenes.

What was it in front?

An expectant crowd, chiefly characterised by its absorption in individual interests, and by remarks whispered by one to another on the appearance of the companions of a third person.

As for the new singer? Bah! new singers were plentiful. This was just the time of year for them to crop up. And, as a rule, they would do far better if they would consent to remain in peaceful obscurity. Better for themselves, because they would be spared the needless humiliation of a public failure; and better for the audience, because it was assuredly better to listen to some seasoned mediocrity, who understood her business thoroughly, than to witness the nervous tremors of a *débutante.*

There had been very promising paragraphs in various journals anent this particular *prima donna,* but then there never yet was a *prima donna* whose advent had not been heralded with brazen trumpet-blasts, thanks to personal influence or the patronage of deluded friends.

Well, the overture has commenced; there is not much time left now ere vague speculation must give place to some kind of certainty.

What pretty girls those three are in the stage-box!

The one with the shining eyes and the dark hair, with lilies-of-the-valley in it, must be some relation of the *débutante.*

She looks so intensely interested, and the hand which toys with her fan trembles visibly. She certainly is the prettiest girl in the theatre. If the singer is as attractive, there is something to hope for yet.

But surely the fair-haired girl by her side is much more like what one supposes Gretchen should be. She has a rosy baby-like face, and really looks as child-like

as Goethe must have desired his innocent heroine to appear.

Can those two young girls be sisters?

The third young lady in the corner is dark too, and evidently much older than the others, whom she does not in the least resemble.

She is handsome, dignified, perhaps even severe.

No, they cannot be sisters; and yet that *distingué* looking old gentleman standing behind them, and making so much use of his glasses, is evidently the father of the eldest. She and he have the same regular features, and—— Ah! this is the vision of Margherita, appearing in obedience to the summons of Mephisto.

The *prima donna* is young, quite young, but she is not beautiful, and the golden plaits which stage tradition demands are not her own.

Her youth is in her favour, and she may have a voice and she may be able to act.——

Ah! this is the scene of the Kermesse; how bright, how animated! What life there is in the music!

Now we shall see.

They do see, all of them, their eyes and their glasses are turned upon the modest Margherita as she tranquilly advances.

Presently they hear also. Only a few notes, but they are pure, melodious, thrilling, and true; and having sung them, Margherita moves with quiet grace and dignity, and her face, which did not prepossess at the first glance, becomes

attractive as its animation returns. Hilda's beauty is not of feature, but of expression. So far, so good, comments the audience.

There may be something more in this *débutante* after all, than previous experiences have warranted one's anticipating.

The third act is over, and with it the Garden Scene, the singer's test *par excellence*, the crowning ordeal in which Margherita can make or mar her future career.

This singer has assured all who hear her that the path which lies straight before her, ready and inviting, will lead on to—fame.

Lord Goselyngge comes to her in tremendous excitement. He stammers, he is flushed and incoherent, while she is pale, self-contained, and calm.

"You are an angel!" he cries enraptured.

"I am so thankful you are content," she answers, smiling, and quietly withdraws the hand he has seized and covered with kisses.

She accepts his homage tranquilly, gratefully.

It is but his tribute to the successful *débutante*. It has nothing whatever to do with her individually; with the Hilda who is panting for a cordial shake of the hand, for a sympathetic smile, for a word of praise and encouragement, such as her father would give her, or Estella or— St. Helier.

Where is St. Helier?

Estella and she have speculated much on his so unaccountable absence.

They have neither of them seen him since that morning on which he had so angrily left Hilda with Mr. Latimer.

She has written to tell him of her intended *début*, but has received no reply.

Even if he is away on circuit, as Jonathan wisely suggested in reply to Estella's anxious inquiries, he would surely see the daily papers; and if so, he must have known about the signorina's first appearance, for it has been announced and commented on *ad libitum.*

Estella, the admired girl in the stage-box, with shining eyes and sprays of lilies-of-the-valley in her dark hair, has at this moment perceived St. Helier as he entered the box opposite, in which the Countess Dowager of Dewminster and the Honourable Benjamin have been seated since the beginning of the performance.

St. Helier has not been with them before; Estella is quite sure of that.

Now that he has made his appearance, will he come over to shake hands with her sisters and herself?

As yet he has not even noticed their presence; he has not once looked their way.

"Isn't he provoking? he turns his glasses in every direction but ours," Estella impatiently whispered to Nettie.

"He knows we are here, and that is why he avoids looking this way," answers Nettie, *sotto voce.* "There has been something between father and him which we know nothing about. I noticed his vexed look just now when he caught sight of father. I believe he has only come up on

to a level with us so that he might see who was at the back of our box. I saw *him* as soon as we came in; he was in the stalls then, there, in that vacant one just below us, at the end of the second row."

"Oh why did you not tell me before?" said Estella reproachfully.

"Because it would not have been fair to Hilda to give you a reason for dividing your attention, which was wholly due to her to-night surely.

"And though I can hang my head, and look down over the front of the box, being privileged as the Baby of the family, such conduct would have been very unbecoming on the part of Miss Estella, you know."

Estella said nothing. She felt the Baby was right.

Mr. Vivian, Mr. Latimer, and Ronald were also occupying a box opposite to the Normans, and on the grand tier.

Theodosia was sulking at home all alone, Jonathan told the girls, but he pointed out Mrs. Braun, seated by the side of Miss Miller, a Grenfellian neighbour, in the stalls below. Miss Trevor, with her weary pale face, was there also, alone.

Mrs. Ashe could not sit in the front of the house with her veil down, although she might wear it over her bonnet and face at rehearsal.

Nettie tried to induce Jonathan to go over to Mrs. Vivian's box between the acts and ask Ronald to come back with him.

But Jonathan was not quite so ready now to come and go at Nettie's capricious bidding, and point-blank refused to obey her on this occasion; and Mary, ever anxious to spare the poor boy, declared their box was sufficiently crowded already.

On this Nettie deliberately turned her back on both Mary and Jonathan, and devoted herself entirely to Estella, with whom she exchanged many whispered confidences.

Meanwhile Mr. Norman, who detested "howling performances," as he most irreverently styled the opera, feeling even more bored by the lengthy pauses between the acts than by the music itself, made his way to Mrs. Vivian's box, where he hoped to refresh himself by a quiet business chat with Mr. Latimer.

"Won't you go over and see my daughters, Mr. Vivian?" suggested Mr. Norman as he shook hands with Ronald, whose chair he desired to occupy.

How enthusiastically Nettie would have thanked her father had she been aware of the service he was all unconsciously rendering her! As it was, all her gratitude for Ronald's appearance so soon after her expressed desire to see him was lavished on that young man himself, who, as the Baby, furiously blushing, whispered to Estella, "must have *felt* that she was longing to speak to him."

The lead of the conversation was certainly undertaken by Nettie, and right willingly too.

Ronald, who felt that the crisis of his fate was now at hand, was too preoccupied to take any active share in the

girls' eager conversation. They, however, had so many remarks to make to him, so many questions for him to answer, that his abstraction was unheeded.

Their praise of and delight with the *débutante* was unanimous, and even quiet Mary unconsciously elevated her voice as she volunteered her meed of praise to the fascinating actress. They were all thoroughly acquainted with Hilda's vocal excellence; but even her most intimate friends were amazed by her evident grasp of the histrionic part of the art to which she was so earnestly devoting herself.

Both Mary and Estella, who knew the text, were moved to something very like lachrymation as Hilda with thrilling pathos told Margherita's simple history, commencing with the words—

"E che! sempre sola! Al campo è il fratel—la madre perdei."

This lovable sad-eyed girl *was* Margherita. Born to love, and, consequently, to suffer.

Hilda no longer existed for those who watched this realistic impersonation, but they saw and heard and felt the actual presence of that ideal Margherita for whom Gounod has composed some of his tenderest and most pathetic harmonies.

Margherita's music may not be classic, but it is human, and therefore it must appeal to humanity.

Since the *finale* of the Garden Scene, Hilda had possessed the sympathies of her audience; this she felt instinctively

as the true artist ever does, and therefore she was now doubly and trebly encouraged by their marked approval.

Even in the wearying sadness of the weird Church Scene, Hilda's genius lifted her above the grovelling tradition which appears to compel most actresses to crawl or plunge and wriggle along the floor, as though in emulation of the very badly used proverbial worm.

Hilda was not a down-trodden creature; she was a suffering woman, sad, ashamed, pitiful, pathetically appealing, but a true woman still; and not one present in all that numerous audience could have resisted the eloquent misery which shone in her great sorrowful eyes, which rang with heart-rending pathos in the now saddened tones of her beautiful thrilling voice.

The part of Siebel was taken by a most accomplished singer and actress, one of those ornaments of the lyric stage whose voice is usually compared to that of a blackbird, so naturally full and sweet and mellow is it, while her appearance must ever gladden the eyes of those who admire a handsome and graceful woman. Faust on this occasion was sung by an aspiring young tenor, whose chief characteristic was, unfortunately, the painful attenuation of his limbs; but Mephistopheles had an excellent representative in an artist who ranks with Mme. ——, that most charming of Siebels.

The audience, however, cared very little for tenor, contralto, or baritone on this occasion.

Margherita had not only been a Prima *Donna*, but the

first in every respect; and Margherita's repeated bows and recalls seemed but to inspire a constant repetition of the bravas and bravissimas which sounded and resounded with redoubled ardour whenever a fresh bouquet fell at the signorina's feet.——

Hilda Santarelli's *début* was now synonymous with Hilda Santarelli's triumph!

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FEEBLE CONSPIRATORS.

Four supper-parties had been organised with a view to fêting the signorina on the night of her *début*.

Mrs. Vivian had sent a polite letter of invitation a week before the event, requesting the pleasure of Hilda's company if her exertions should not have too greatly fatigued her.

And after the brilliant success of the Garden Scene, a far more urgent invitation from the Shoddy-Princess was brought to the signorina's dressing-room; a pencilled note of extravagant congratulation and vehement entreaty for the honour of her presence at a little supper at No. 20, where only her most intimate friends would be present, and she, therefore, would be quite *sans gêne*. There was a P.S. to this note, scrawled in Mr. Latimer's large bold hand:

"Pray do not let us vainly await the crowning joy of the evening—your presence in our midst—and our chance of personally congratulating you on your triumph."

The countess dowager, more than ever *éprise* by the talented signorina, since her success was assured, also supplemented her previous invitation by a note imploring Hilda's presence at No. 1. "Only Addie and Ben, Estella Norman, and Mr. St. Helier to meet you, so you won't have to put on company manners." Thus the countess wrote in her box at the Opera.

Hilda had seen St. Helier in the dowager's box, and when she read the countess's note and knew she would have the chance of spending the evening in *his* presence, she wavered—for a second.

She had not seen him since he left her in anger more than a week ago now, and she longed at least to know that there was perfect peace between them again.

The Norman girls had also, and most cordially, asked her to go home and sup with them. They did not wait until her triumph was assured; indeed, they would but have repeated their urgent invitation far more eagerly if she had been depressed by failure, and in such case it is more than probable that Hilda would have gone to them for consolation and peace.

But now she needed no encouragement; and it occurred to her that she would be fulfilling a *duty* if she appeared at the grand supper given by Lord Goselyngge to the professionals, and at which she had been asked

in courtesy to her rank as *prima donna*, to play the part of hostess.

But at the end of the opera the signorina realised that, for this evening at least, she had done *duty* enough, and that she surely might be spared from making any further efforts for the sake of pleasing either Lord Goselyngge, the public generally, or that most officious and irrepressible factotum the Anglo-Italian, Giacomo Arrowsmith.

Her success was now assured; it was a matter for congratulation only, which admitted of neither doubt nor misgiving.

Utterly weary, though by no means depressed, Hilda resolved to decline all the inducements so alluringly offered to her for the prolongation of the evening.

She avowed that she longed to be alone, and desired to rest in peace for this night, and as she impartially declined all the invitations given her, on the same plea, no one could possibly be offended.

To one and all she answered: "Excuse me to-night, but come and see me to-morrow."

She was, nevertheless, considerably surprised to hear that Mr. Ronald Vivian and Mr. Jonathan Curtis were waiting to see her at half-past ten o'clock on the following morning.

For Ronald Vivian's visit immediately after her *début* she was, of course, in some measure prepared, and she had very decisively resolved on the final answer she

would now be compelled to make to his repeated proposals.

But Jonathan Curtis! This was, indeed, an unexpected pleasure! Ah! perhaps he came with some message from his friends the Norman girls, or, more likely still, from Mr. Peregrine Latimer, whose very marked attention, by-the-bye, Hilda was most desirous of suppressing to some extent.—— She hated men to presume! Such were the thoughts in the signorina's mind as she entered the drawing-room, in which the two young men were anxiously, or, to be accurate, nervously awaiting her.

No greater contrast could possibly be imagined than that presented to Hilda's calm dispassionate glance by the appearance of her unexpected visitors.

Jonathan, tall, loose, ungainly, his greenish eyes shifting as uneasily as did the weight of his body from one large foot to the other, his auburn hair looking undeniably red in the uncompromising light of the morning; and his freckled skin so moist, in consequence of the heat and his mental perturbation, that it necessitated the constant application of a crimson handkerchief, which the ill-advised youth, in his love for bright colours, had specially selected, as likely to tone down the too vivid tints of his complexion and hair.

Thus, as regarded the outward man, poor Johnny appeared to the signorina; but she, keenly sensitive for others, as well as herself, was perfectly aware that beneath that ungainly exterior sterling qualities were hidden, and

that a kinder and a more thoroughly unselfish heart than poor old much-abused Johnny Pry's, seldom beat in a manly bosom.

The Norman girls had most impartially informed Hilda of Johnny's virtues as well as of his superficial faults.

Mary had praised him in her reticent, but all the more impressive, fashion. Nettie had alternately laughed at and abused him, but always ended by owning that "there really never was a better fellow." Estella had confided the unavowed secret of Jonathan's absorbing affection for the Baby, and had laughed with Hilda at this romantic passion on the part of one who, to judge by appearances, was the most prosaic of individuals.

At Mrs. Braun's, Hilda, in her quietly observant fashion, had noted and been considerably impressed by the hero-worship so lavishly bestowed on Peregrine Latimer by this really modest and very timid young man.

What errand could possibly have brought him to her room this morning, and in the company of a youth to whose undeniable grace, refinement, and beauty, poor Johnny's every look and movement served as so many foils?

"Adonis and a satyr," was Hilda's inward comment on the contrast presented to her outward vision.

Ronald's classical features certainly seemed cast in the mould of ideal sculpture, and were finely chiselled withal; whereas Johnny had no features of any kind, deserving the name.

And yet they were "good men and true," both of them:

kind, helpful, generous to a fault—to what would appear as faulty in the eyes of the world, that is, for they were ready to ignore their own interests where those of their dear ones happened to be at stake.

"I had hoped to come to you upon a very different mission, signorina, now that your *début* is a *fait accompli*," Ronald said, speaking with a certain effort after the embarrassing silence which had followed the first commonplace greeting of these three, so oddly brought together.

Hilda looked straight into the speaker's troubled eyes, and gave a little sigh; the sigh was inaudible, but Jonathan, who was observant in his way, noticed a quick look—a look of relief pass over the signorina's face.

Of the different mission to which Ronald alluded, Curtis knew nothing; and it was characteristic of the man that even in the midst of his present anxiety and preoccupation, he mentally resolved to try and find out for himself what that secret business of Ronald's might be.

* * * * *

The three were seated by this time, and a fresh feeling of wonder came into Hilda's mind, as to the mysterious errand which had brought these men into her presence, and now held them silent, spell-bound, as it were.

"I hope your mission is not a very unpleasant one?" she said, trying to smile, but herself becoming nervous under the depressing influence of this inexplicable hesitation and subsequent silence.

"We really ought first of all to apologise to the

signorina for troubling her in this matter at all," said Jonathan, suddenly bracing himself for the effort of explanatory speech, which evidently had already proved too trying for his companion.

"Pray do nothing of the kind," said Hilda eagerly. "I begin to fear there must be something wrong; that a trouble threatens some mutual friend of ours.

"Pray let me know the truth, and as quick as you can."

She had risen, moved by her anxiety, and extended her hands in the eagerness of supplication; for she now felt convinced that trouble of some kind brought these ambassadors to her.

"If in any way I can be of service," she continued appealingly, "I pray you will at once command me, without any such thought as ceremony or apologation."

Hilda's English was not perfect; but no fault could be found with her womanly tact, and her ready desire to help wherever help might be required of her.

"We determined to come to a lady for advice in this painful matter," resumed Jonathan, his courage rising with the inspiriting sound of his own voice, "and I proposed laying the case before Miss Mary Norman; but Mr. Vivian, very justly, I am sure, considered that you, signorina, being quite neutral, would the more readily give us your impartial opinion. It is just possible that with Mary Norman some personal feeling might enter into her view of the subject."

"For my own part I was fully determined," cried Ronald hastily, "that you yourself must be guarded against the machinations of one whom we now cannot regard as other than a base impostor, and into whose hands we fear you have already given considerable power as regards your future."

Ronald's eyes flashed with anger, and his next words were spoken with an amount of decision which startled while it alarmed the signorina.

"We have come to warn you against Peregrine Latimer," he said, "who is playing a very treacherous game——"

"We only surmise that such is the case," Jonathan interrupted nervously. His voice and his lips both trembled as he volunteered his mild protest, and he really looked as disconsolate as if he himself had been discovered in some nefarious transaction.

"What has he done?" cried Hilda, flushing in a manner quite unusual to her.

"Have you given him any money, signorina?" asked Ronald quickly; "this is no time for mincing matters; pray tell me the truth at once."

"I have only given him one hundred pounds," said Hilda, stammering and evidently much discomfited by this unprecedented cross-examination into her private affairs.

"He told me that was the usual fee on the occasion of the signing of so profitable an agreement as mine certainly is, thanks chiefly to *his* great consideration on my behalf; of that I am quite sure; and, indeed, indeed, I believe,

I hope you must be mistaken, gentlemen, in thinking bad things of so kind and so clever a man."

Jonathan groaned aloud, by way of proving his earnest participation in her evident anxiety.

"You are sure you have given Peregrine Latimer *nothing* but that one hundred pounds?" resumed Ronald, too stern in his pursuit of justice to heed any plea for mercy at this moment.

He confronted Hilda with such earnest truth-compelling eyes, that hers sank beneath the searching inquiry of his direct gaze.

Both he and she had for the moment forgotten that he was really only her very humble adorer.

She now regarded him rather as an unwilling witness might, who is inclined to resent and resist the too pertinacious inquiries of a persistent counsel, or of a too officious judge.

"You can assure us that you have given him nothing else?" continued Ronald breathlessly.

He was quite aware of her reluctance to meet his questioning glance; and he feared that this boded some harm to herself.

"I gave him a note, written by his dictation, and promising him one-third of my earnings for the first three years; provided he succeeded in making a further profitable arrangement for me with the Diamond Opera, as he expected to do."

The feeling of the unwilling witness became stronger in

Hilda as she felt herself compelled to speak, and she looked at Ronald with something very like defiance in her eyes.

He had suppressed the fiery Italian oath which rose to his lips as he listened to her last explanation; but he now vented his concentrating wrath in the one emphatic word: "Scoundrel!" which he hissed out between his teeth.

"This villain has made overtures to my mother, has —has asked her to marry him," the young man continued, his indignation growing with the recital of Latimer's misdeeds.

"He has robbed her, robbed her of large sums of money, on the pretext of investing it in some fantastic scheme, which has no existence save in his own brain.

"This, Mr. Curtis, to whom I am deeply indebted, has already ascertained for me."

Ronald, who was courtesy personified, bowed very deferentially to Jonathan as he expressed his gratitude to that gentleman, to whom he now said:

"You will, I am sure, best convince the signorina, by telling her exactly how and what further villanies of Mr. Latimer's you discovered last night."

Jonathan literally shivered as he thus heard himself called upon to bear testimony to the guilt of a man whom he but very lately had so keenly delighted to honour.

"I pray you will believe, signorina," he stammered, quite breathless in his confusion, "that my discovery of Mr. Latimer's un—un—trustworthiness was not the result

of my own seeking, but was forced upon me in consequence of certain rigorous inquiries Mary Norman had commanded me to make in the City.

"She is a very shrewd girl, and has wonderful sense, as you no doubt have discovered ere this, and she had some reasons of her own for suspecting Mr. Latimer.

"Added to these secret misgivings on her part, came the well-grounded fear that Mr. Norman might be induced to invest money in this great Anti-Bee——"

"Swindle," interpolated Ronald, as the other hesitated in his vain search for an appropriate and yet not too condemnatory word.

"Urged by Miss Norman, and feeling it to be my duty to protect my honoured chief and his family, as far as lay in my power," continued Jonathan, losing his sense of compassion for the new friend, in the warm declaration of his zeal on behalf of the older ones, "I entered into this affair with a pertinacity of which I am half ashamed——"

"Of which you have every reason to be most proud," Ronald fiercely corrected him.

"And I am indeed deeply grieved to be obliged to confess," Jonathan continued in a lower tone, "that my research into the origin and progress of this suddenly so much vaunted enterprise, has been most disheartening in every respect.

"I employed a broker to represent me, being very desirous to avoid all contact with the principals in the Anti-Bee scheme; and my *employé* and I together succeeded

first of all in discovering that Mr. Peregrine Latimer in his own person represented the entire and oft-quoted committee, and also that letters purporting to come from one Sir Fulsome Venture were in reality conceived and penned by Mr. Latimer himself."

These condemnatory details were in themselves not very intelligible to Hilda, but their very serious nature was thoroughly conveyed to her by poor Jonathan's miserable looks, the painful hesitation of his speech, and the glowering anger in Ronald's frowning face.

"And you discovered something of all this only last night, Mr. Curtis?" she asked, hoping to escape further commercial explanations, which she was quite unable to understand.

"Pray tell your story to the signorina just as you told it to me," suggested Ronald, "that is how she will follow you best."

"I had been rather distressed yesterday evening," Johnny commenced apologetically, "at having to leave poor Miss Braun at home alone, while we all of us were looking forward to the wonderful treat you were to give us, signorina. For this I am sure you will pardon my thanking you at once in my own name, as well as on the part of all who had the happiness of hearing you."

Hilda had never before so thoroughly appreciated those excellent qualities of Jonathan's, on which Mary was wont to dilate, as she did at this moment.

"He is *gauche*, but he certainly has much discrimination,"

the gratified *débutante* admitted to herself. And who can blame her for making this discovery at a moment when Johnny's perspicacity was so plainly proved by his admiration for herself?

Hilda was a true artist, and she was also a true woman.

"So Miss Braun did not come to the Opera at all?" she asked, after a momentary and reflective pause.

She would have wished by her undoubted success to have impressed even cavilling ill-tempered Theodosia. Indeed, a word of congratulation from that jealous spinster, however reluctantly uttered, would have counted far more with Hilda now than the fulsome praises of her confessed admirers.

Such was the change which the triumph of one night had already worked in the modest unsophisticated girlish nature.

Yesterday she thought but of that golden treasure, her voice: to-day she already desired personal homage.

"The Normans were asking about Miss Theodosia," Jonathan resumed, when Hilda looked towards him again, as if desirous that he should continue; "and as their box was rather crowded at that moment, and the Church Scene was just over, I could not help thinking how sad it was that while Mrs. Braun and—and Mr. Latimer, and we all of us were so enjoying ourselves, that poor Miss Dosie should be moping at home all alone.

"So I asked Mary Norman's leave, and resolved to cut away to the Gardens in a hansom and to bring Miss Dosie

back with me, will she nil she." Jonathan, in the remembrance of his late ardour, began to improvise *ad lib.* himself, even while he was endeavouring to convince his hearers of the immovable strength of his inflexible purpose. "I wished her to see the last scenes, to judge for herself, and then to return home with her mother.

"My programme, you see, was very clearly defined," Jonathan continued, rising from his chair so as to be better able to "tread out" the measure of his increasing embarrassment on alternate feet, "but the chief actor, or actress, begging Miss Braun's pardon, was not quite up to the part proposed for her. I let myself into the house, searched all the sitting-rooms for Miss Dosie, actually intended to tap at the door of her own room, but found it wide open——"

"And to cut short a long and painful story," interrupted Ronald, with less courtesy and far more impatience than he could have accounted for to himself, "Mr. Curtis found the unfortunate lady in Mr. Peregrine Latimer's study, whither she had retired with her passionate griefs, her frantic jealousy, and her despairing love. Desirous of keeping within the shrine of *her* idol, even while *he* was bowing the knee to another saint, Miss Theodosia had laid her head upon his writing-desk, and was sobbing her poor old heart out in all the bitter anguish of unrequited affection."

Ronald laughed aloud as he completed this dramatic description of the unfortunate spinster's sufferings, to

which he had alluded in a tone of the most withering contempt.

Hilda, always eager in defending the absent, and most especially the weaker side, now vehemently protested on Theodosia's behalf.

"Poor lady, poor lady! it is my firm conviction she really loves that man, the man you now think so bad. And a woman will do and dare or suffer anything, everything, rather than believe ill of the man whom she loves."

"Hilda!" cried Ronald, unmindful of his business errand, of Jonathan's presence, and of all but his own strong smouldering passion, kindled into sudden flame as it was by the bright sympathetic light in the eyes of his adored one—"Hilda, that *is* love; you know it now; you have learnt to feel it yourself, and it is—oh! glorious angelic Hilda! tell me it is—that love you feel for—me."

He threw himself on the ground at her feet, and strove to possess himself of her reluctant hands.

"And can it be possible that you are so suffering still!" she exclaimed, moving a step away from him, and herself for the moment oblivious of the presence of Jonathan, who was doing his utmost to disappear between the blind and the open window.

"I have waited so long, so patiently; I have striven to make no sign all these long weary months, Hilda," Ronald resumed, his eager protestations changing to a

pitiful tone of pleading entreaty; "but now the allotted time is over. You have made your *début*, and I have a right—yes, a *right* to receive my answer. Hilda, noble, beautiful, generous Hilda, give me my reward—answer me—at last."

"I have not even heard the end of Mr. Curtis's adventures yet," said Hilda, far more relieved than annoyed to hear Jonathan's warning cough, the only means in his power to assert his presence and save himself from any further participation in this utterly unexpected and most romantic *dénoûment* of a scene which had commenced in so very prosaic a fashion.

"I will write you a letter and tell you all in that, Ronald," said Hilda to her discomfited adorer, whose present mortification was as thorough as had been the previous *élan* which had carried him quite beyond the reach of his matter-of-fact surroundings.

For a few blissful moments he had realised Hilda's gracious presence and the possible attainment of his heart's desire only; now came the dire reaction, and with it the cruel conviction that he had made a fool of himself, and pleaded his cause in the uncompromising presence of one "Johnny Pry."

But Johnny Pry on this occasion acted with an amount of delicacy and discretion which Mary, alone of all his friends, would have considered him capable of.

He appeared to be quite unaware of the compromising nature of Ronald's late passionate avowals, and too much

absorbed in his own relation of Theodosia's troubles, to have paid any attention to those of the unhappy lover who now sat with averted face, silent and mortified, though not without a gleam of hope in his mind as he thought of the letter she had volunteered to write to him, the letter in which she had said she would tell him *all.* That comprehensive *all* and the smile with which it had been spoken, being quite enough to encourage hopes which were ready to spring up revived at the faintest glimmer of sunshine.

"I will not trouble you with the details of my prolonged interview with poor Miss Braun," said Jonathan, addressing himself to Hilda, "nor need I tell you how she was at last induced to confine her painful secrets to me.

"First of all, she was very very angry to hear that Mr. Latimer was with Mrs. Vivian; and then I think it was her jealous indignation which led her on to the confession of her love for and her clandestine engagement to—Peregrine.

"Anxious, perhaps suspicious, as I was already, it was only natural that I should at once strive to ascertain if Miss Braun had been induced to enter into any speculation of her lover's. And I then discovered that she had already made over a considerable part of her private fortune to her intended husband.

"It still seems like a horrid nightmare to me," said Jonathan parenthetically, and with a groan he added: "The

terrible part of it is, that there now seems to be no chance of awaking from it."

"Did you tell Miss Braun of your suspicions?" asked Hilda, regarding the question entirely from a feminine point of view, "and could you make her doubt the good faith of her beloved?"

"No," said Jonathan, "nor did I seek to do so. The poor lady was suffering so acutely already by reason of her jealous fears, that I was determined not needlessly to add to her anxieties by raising doubts of another kind in her mind, until circumstances should compel us to take some decisive action *à propos* of this——"

"Scoundrel!" cried Ronald fiercely, and rose as he spoke; "what possible hesitation can you pretend to have, Curtis, in calling this impostor by the name he deserves?

"The first notion *I* had of all this villany," Ronald continued, evidently glad of any excuse for giving a vent to his pent-up feelings in passionate speech, "was last night, when I very naturally resented what appeared to me as most unwarrantable familiarity on that brute's part. I caught him kissing my mother's hand, not as an act of homage—that might have been pardonable—but like a lover; —ugh! His subsequent insolence led to some sharp retorts on my part, and then by degrees I induced my unhappy and most deluded parent to confess to me the nature of the trap this designing villain had so craftily laid for her. Curtis had already whispered a word of warning to me during the

evening, and so I at once determined, regardless of the lateness of the hour, to go round to No. 39 and inform him of my appalling discovery."

"But everyone in the Gardens has known and discussed Mrs. Vivian's engagement throughout this past week," Hilda interposed; and, turning towards Ronald, asked: "How was it possible that you knew nothing about it?"

"I never went into the Gardens except to get the chance of a word with you, signorina," Ronald admitted pathetically; and Jonathan vaguely wondered if Vivian had mistaken Nettie for Hilda on the occasion of their very earnest conversation together.

"It seems that the persons to whom certain news is most important are always the last to hear of it," said Hilda, rather at a loss as to what it behoved her to do or to say next.

Jonathan again came to the rescue.

"We have told you all this, signorina, in the first place to warn you against having any further dealings with Latimer, and also to ask if you, who are far more intimate with Mr. St. Helier than either of us, will kindly consent to tell him the facts of the case, and ask him for his advice as to the next step, the first legal step, which must of course be taken in this matter now. We naturally desire to try and regain some portion at least of the money which these too confiding ladies have handed over to the Anti-Bee Company."

"Robbery," quoth Ronald curtly.

"And at the same time we feel it is most desirable to keep Latimer without the faintest suspicion of our having made such discoveries at all," continued Jonathan impressively; "and we would therefore beg of you, if he should call upon you, signorina, as he most probably will to-day, to show him no change of manner when you receive him."

"For that I am actress enough, you can so far rely on me," said Hilda.

"But about Mr. St. Helier?"

"He will surely be only too thankful if he can be the means of rescuing you from the talons of this impostor," cried Ronald warmly; "and you can learn his opinion as a friend, whereas we men should have to go to him officially and that would complicate matters at the outset, and also necessitate our dragging in the names of the injured ladies, from whom we have as yet not even received permission to take any action whatever in the matter."

As Hilda listened to the alternate feeble pleading and excuses of her visitors, she could not refrain from a mental comment on their utter helplessness, and on their evident incapacity to cope with the extensive experience of the astute Latimer.

"Well, they were only boys after all," she thought, and a longing possessed her to hear St. Helier's opinion on this miserable business. How refreshing his clear decisive speech would be, after all the aimless twaddle to which she had been compelled to listen for the last two interminable hours.

"I will consult Mr. St. Helier, and at once," she said, rising to show her visitors that she desired this prolonged interview to end—at last.

"As for the ladies in question, I would strongly advise you to give them no hint whatever of your intended prosecution, for in their present disposition you may be sure that they would resent your desire to help them, and would regard any interference as most unpardonable, quite *trop de zèle*, in fact."

With this remarkably shrewd inference, the signorina shook hands with her visitors, whose long-delayed departure she could not but hail with a feeling of intense relief.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE PLOT IN ST. HELIER'S LIFE.

ALTHOUGH the countess dowager, yielding to her dear "infatuated" Benjamin's earnest entreaties, had written down Estella Norman's name as one of the guests to be asked to meet the *débutante* after the opera was over, it so happened that the hurried note of invitation never reached Estella's hands, for the very sufficient reason that it still lay in Mr. Latimer's pocketbook, in which it had been placed

with another letter for personal delivery, and completely forgotten afterwards.

The fact was that Mr. Latimer's extended "operations" in the City left him very little leisure to bestow on any of the minor commissions with which his lady clients were wont to charge him.

Poor Estella little guessed, as she so wistfully, so longingly glanced across at the dowager's box at the Opera, in which Mr. St. Helier had taken up his position, that there had been a chance of her meeting the truant barrister at supper later in the evening.

As it was, she returned home with her father and sisters contentedly enough.

Hilda's success had delighted all her friends, and filled Estella with unfeigned exultation, which feeling was by no means diminished by the fact that Hilda had sent her a pencilled note in which she explained that she could accept *none* of the invitations to supper which her friends had so kindly given her.

So Hilda and St. Helier would not meet to-night, while the bright light of her new triumph was casting such a bewildering radiance about the fortunate *prima donna*.

And therefore Estella went home quite contented—at peace with the world and herself—thankful above all things for the knowledge that *he* was now in London.

"You surely can't be wanting to go to Mrs. Toegoode's *again*, Stella?" exclaimed Nettie next morning, with a very disapproving look and tone.

Estella certainly had profited to the utmost by Adelaida's general invitation, and had wandered off to No. 3 for a consultation, which both of them really enjoyed, at least three mornings in every week.

In one sense her intentions in thus leaving home had been lamentably frustrated; for St. Helier, who of course was the loadstar that tempted her to take these solitary matutinal rambles, was striving hard to forget both her and that other perplexing enigma in a distant county, where he devoted all his time to the closest possible study of his briefs.

"That St. Helier is pushing his way to the front pretty considerably," one of the legal fraternity remarked to another.

"Yes, by Jove!" answered the other, "there's no depending on the quiet fellows in these days; you think you're safe and that they're a deal too lazy ever to take the trouble to interfere with you in the least, when, lo and behold! one fine morning they burst forth quite alarmingly in a perfect torrent of eloquence."

"This fellow has sound practical sense, and understands arguing a case too; that goes farther than your puff oratory by a very long way. I mean to give him a couple of briefs when we're all back in town again;" so Mr. Grey, the eminent solicitor, declared.

"Still waters run deep," commented the other, himself making a note of St. Helier's successful pleadings in his memorandum-book.

Now, St. Helier was in town again, and therefore it became imperatively necessary to Estella to go and see Mrs. Toegoode the very morning after Hilda's *début* at the Opera.

Nettie objected, and even remonstrated with her literary sister on this occasion.

"It's stupid of you always to be running off to Mrs. Toegoode's," she said. "We never get a quiet morning's work and chat together now.

"There's Mary sent for by Mrs. Vivian; *they've* evidently got some secret understanding, and there are you going to talk business with Adela-ida. What does it all mean, Stella? I don't believe you talk any business at all; and what's more to the point, I am quite sure your novel never came to such a complete standstill as since you went to the countess's party. I have never even set eyes on the dear old manuscript since that night, and, the other day when you were round at Hilda's, I went up into the den and groped and burrowed everywhere, but could not find a single chapter. Have you left it all at Mrs. Toegoode's this long long while?"

"I am going to fetch it back now, at once," said Estella, rising and congratulating herself on having thus evaded the telling of a direct lie, an ordeal from which, in spite of her lately complicated experiences, the girl still shrank with a strangely unfeminine horror.

"And if I promise to copy out that barcarole accompaniment for you while you're away, you'll read me all the

new bits in 'Gwendolen' when you come back, won't you, Stella?" Nettie pleaded, looking very wistfully into her sister's eyes.

"If I have a satisfactory interview," said Estella, unable to meet the Baby's appealing glance, and speaking very slowly—"if I have a satisfactory interview, I'll do whatever you may be pleased to command when I come home again."

Though really unwilling to tell a lie, Estella had quite a feminine pleasure in exerting her ingenuity by walking as far as she dared trust herself upon that slippery and most delusive plank, yclept "prevarication."

There was no welcoming blaze of sunlight to dazzle her as she stepped out into the Gardens this morning.

The air was heavy, oppressive, and the lowering gray sky seemed to presage a coming storm.

Estella's heart was heavy too, as she slowly made her way towards the old oak, whose whispering leaves seemed to be telling one another some very mysterious story.

Would he come this morning? and would he bring her back her manuscript?

It was very wrong of him to have left her without it all this time. What Nettie had said was quite true; since the night of the dowager's party, or rather (and this date Nettie did not know) since the following morning, her novel had been shamefully neglected, and now she really must get it back, if only to prove to Adela-ida and to her own people

that she could and would complete the task she had once set herself.

"I feel almost afraid to ask even for your gracious pardon, Miss Estella," said St. Helier, who had entered by the Grove gate, just as the girl approached the oak-tree. "I fear you have, and, alas! with apparent reason, been seriously displeased with me."

"Because you retained my book while you were out of town?" she asked, that sad heavy feeling at her heart giving place to a sudden and most inexplicable gladness.

Was it the mere fact of his presence which caused her this happiness, or was it that subtle tenderness in his eyes and in his voice which she so infinitely preferred to his ordinary cool and cynical manner.

"You knew, at least, that I was away," he said, evidently relieved.

"Jonathan told us you were most likely away on circuit," she said; "and as the signorina had heard nothing of you, and I had not seen you, I——"

"Had you looked for me then?" he resumed eagerly.

"I came out almost every morning," said she, "because I was quite at a loss without *that*," she pointed to the roll of paper which he held in his hand.

"My talisman!" he said smiling, and evidently very well pleased with the turn the conversation was taking. "I felt I should wield quite a mighty sceptre as regarded your destinies, Miss Estella, if only I could contrive to retain possession of your much cherished manuscript."

"Don't you think you were taking rather a mean advantage?" she asked, longing yet dreading to meet his eyes.

"I was about to quote a proverb in self-defence," he resumed, "but perhaps you would not approve, and I really am quite unable to risk your displeasure again."

"I don't think it has ever fallen upon you as yet," she said smiling, "and I do wish to know by what proverb you intended to vindicate yourself."

"All's fair in love and war," said he.

"Is there to be war between us then?" she asked, feeling that some effort at speech was incumbent upon her, yet scarcely knowing what words she could use that would not betray the growing agitation of her thoughts.

"No, not war; God forbid!" he cried, "but oh Estella! let there be love."

She sat quite silent for awhile, but when he laid his hand on hers, she clasped it closely, clingingly, conveying a perfect assurance by the lingering caress of her shapely fingers.

What need was there for immediate speech when they so thoroughly understood one another?

* * * * *

"I was naughty the other day, the last time we sat here together," she said, after a long, a very long, but a most satisfactory silence.

"I was distressed about my book, and I did not think

you were quite pleased with it, or with me, and I fear I was very ungracious about the sketch you had so kindly written out for me. But I will promise to use it now, and I will——"

"And *we* will," substituted St. Helier, with a smile that made her glow with its warm light.

"And *we* will work it out together, and make a *real* novel of it after all," she assented, gently clapping her hands in a delight, the exuberance of which demanded some outward sign.

He suddenly caught both those demonstrative little hands again now, and held them in that firm possessive grasp which almost made her wince with pain, and yet, by its calm assertion of power, was so exceedingly reassuring, so strangely delightful.

"When you are my wife, Stella, I must tell you about the dark plot which clouded so many of my years, and made an old man of me before my time." He pointed to his hair as he spoke, and Estella looked at those gray signs of the storm of life, which had struck her as incongruous when first she noticed them there.

"I should like to hear the story of your life here, now, at once," said she pleadingly; "and as it is the first favour I have dared to ask of you, I think you are bound to grant it."

He leant towards her, and said in so low, so tender a tone, that it filled her eyes with sudden and quite unaccountable tears, as certain strains of music will, sung in a

thrilling minor key: "I can refuse you nothing now, my darling, but I shall want all my courage for this task, and you must inspire me first; say to me: 'Tell me the story of your life, dear Everard, because I love you.'"

She repeated his words slowly, methodically, like a child anxious to say its lesson just as the master bids it.

"And now, my Stella, I want a bribe as well," he said masterfully, but with the light of love in his eyes all the time.

She lowered the sunshade (where was the sun?), and thus sheltered, or rather hidden, she bent towards him, and gently touched his brow with her lips. But their sweet contact set his heart beating wildly, madly.

He jumped up, and grasping the parasol with one hand and her resisting arm with the other, he pressed his lips on hers with a passionate, lingering, delicious kiss, that left her almost frightened.

Pale, trembling, and quite breathless: "My darling, my darling!" he whispered, frightened himself at the sight of her suddenly white face, "forgive me, oh forgive me! I love you; I have loved you so long, so long—since the first hour in which we spoke together here; and I have been wilfully blind, blind towards your sweet maidenly affection; blind towards the *reality* of the attraction which you and you only possess for me."

Her pretty bright colour had all come back into her face again now, and she could even smile quite saucily, as she peeped out from under the fringe of the sunshade to

reassure herself that they were still alone, unwatched, and unsuspected.

"Give me your hand, child," he said, and when he held it, he looked into her sweet dark eyes and added, speaking most impressively: "First of all, I wish to tell you, Stella, for my satisfaction as much as for yours, that since the long past days of my youth's one great irretrievable folly, I have never kissed a woman's lips with love, with passion, as I could not resist kissing yours just now, when heaven seemed open to me once again, with a glorious promise of peace and perfect happiness. You believe me, don't you, dearest?"

Believe him? of course she did, entirely, implicitly; and just because she also felt their momentary happiness to be so perfect, she, a true daughter of Eve, insisted on learning something at once, which might bring a cloud upon their love-lit horizon.

"Tell me all about it now," she pleaded, "I want to know; it seems so impossible that you can ever have been so rash, so foolish, as you would try to make me believe."

"I was just twenty-one," he said, feeling bound to comply with her request, but not at all relishing the task he had undertaken with such a very good grace. "My book of poems, you remember, was just published, and I was in that state of *Schwärmerei* which is eminently characteristic of the youths who care not at all about physical training, but surfeit themselves with a mental diet, of which Heine forms the *pièce de résistance*.

"Poor Heine! yes, he was a *Schwärmer* too, in one sense, but then his biting cynicism kept the mental balance pretty correct. With me, perhaps because my health was not robust, sentimentality ran away with reason, prudence, and all the other qualities which are supposed to elevate mankind above the unthinking instinct-following level of the honest brute.

"I fell in love—to use the accepted form of speech, which in my case would be far more correctly stated by the admission that I saw a very pretty face, and caught a violent attack of the delirious fever, described as *love.*"

"First love," suggested Estella meekly. She was already smarting at this sudden contact with the unpleasant fact she had insisted on unveiling.

"She, the pretty woman, was considerably my senior," he continued, bent now on getting through this irksome task with all possible despatch.

"She regarded my boyish adoration with charming tolerance; she caused me to quarrel with my family and to abandon my studies, and my first chance of distinguishing myself in my profession; such a chance as comes to a man but once in a lifetime, and then—she married me."

Estella started up from her seat now, and stood before him in silent terror.

"Child," he said, nervously catching at her hand, "what does it matter now? She bade me go through the ceremony of marriage with her—and I obeyed—as I should

have followed her into the fire, had she asked me to do so."

"Oh!" moaned the poor foolhardy little daughter of Eve, vainly wishing now that she had never sought to hear a word of all this.

"Is that pretty woman dead?" she asked; and that possibility seemed to bring back a faint gleam of light into the darkly lowering horizon so suddenly closing in about her.

"God knows!" said he.

"But she was your wife—don't *you* know?" cried Estella.

"No; she was not my wife," said he; "she had a husband living at that time."

"And you discovered this?" asked Estella, her interest growing with her boundless anxiety.

"Good Mrs. O'Neil, my mother's maid, did that for me," said he; "and so 'I wandered through the world once more, lighthearted and content.' No, Stella; until I began to know, began to love you, I have known neither peace nor hope, nor content—but now?"

"I will teach you all those good things, my dear," said she, simply, reassuringly, "and we will write the story of your life together, and that will be a real novel, for I understand now that human lives have their plot too."

"Even though there has been neither poison, conspiracy, nor violent death in them?" he asked, smiling, since she smiled; happy, so happy, because he had made her so.

"You forget that we *can* make our case good with big——"

"How dare you?" he cried, as he stopped the word on her lips with a kiss.

A kiss which held two startled observers spell-bound on the gravel path.

CHAPTER XXX.

ESTELLA'S TRIUMPH.

"Oh Hilda!" cried Estella, advancing to meet the new-comers, and bowing to Mrs. Ashe, who was the signorina's companion.

"Oh Hilda! dear friend, congratulate me now; for this is the hour of triumph, and I am as happy in it as you were last night in yours."

Indeed the girl was happy, far too happy to be troubled with any sense of shame at being discovered in the embrace of her lover; far too happy to think it possible that the cause of her rejoicing might not gladden the hearts of all others.

Hilda took both her friend's hands, and kissed her on either cheek. "I wish you both all that is best in love and happiness," she said, and said it earnestly, striving with all the strength of her womanly nature to subdue the miserable

revolt, which had filled her mind with furious anger, when first she beheld her rival—(her rival?) what despicable folly—*his wife elect*—in St. Helier's arms.

"It is fortunate for me that I should happen to meet you here, Mr. St Helier," she said, after having ceremoniously congratulated him, in his turn. "I was on my way to the Grove, to your house, now, being compelled to consult you on business matters which are of the greatest consequence to some of our mutual friends. Allow me to introduce Mrs. Ashe," she added, "who has kindly undertaken to chaperon me, and who says she can materially assist us in the difficult task we may have before us."

"Will you allow me, in my turn, to suggest that we all adjourn to my house?" said St. Helier, glancing from one to the other of the three ladies, and vaguely wondering at the extraordinary caprice which induced Mrs. Ashe to wear a black mask on a stiflingly hot July morning. But there was no accounting for the vagaries of women, he sagely concluded, and could not resist taking a surreptitious glance at the bright unveiled face of his darling, his fascinating Estella.

Yes, she was his now, and the foolish conflict in his restless mind was over; he could never waver in his allegiance again for a single treacherous moment. And she,—no—she was not one of the cruel capricious ones either, and she loved him; she had confessed it now, and she had kissed him.

"Are you all rehearsing a play here, good people?"

exclaimed Mrs. Toegoode, who, accompanied by Nettie, had just entered the Gardens, and was now advancing eagerly towards the group under the oak-tree.

"What do *you* mean by coming out in the daytime like this, you most unhappy creature?" Adela-ida whispered to Mrs. Ashe, whose arm she seized in a grip that was almost vicious.

"She has come by my particular request, Mrs. Toegoode," said Hilda, who, though not able to hear the other's words, had guessed their uncivil import from her angry look and manner, and felt doubly indignant with the authoress, since she had succeeded in making Mrs. Ashe confess that that ambitious literary character was her own sister, although ashamed to own the close relationship existing between them.

Hilda would prove to the unnatural sister, she thought, that others might still be proud and glad of poor Ada's company, in spite of her sad disfigurement.

There were two other sisters in that oddly assembled group, who also whispered to one another in hurried undertones.

"I went to Mrs. Toegoode's to fetch you, Stella," Nettie said, dismay and surprise both expressed in the long inquiring glance with which she turned to Estella.

"And I was here all the time; here, and with *him*," answered Estella, her eyes far more eloquent than her whispered words; for they met *his* at this moment.

He answered their welcome, though most unconscious

appeal by instantly making his way to the Baby's side, whose small hand he clasped, as he said:

"We have your good wishes, dear sister Nettie, haven't we?"

"Oh! haven't you?" cried Nettie, whose joy was always of the irrepressible kind. She would dearly have liked to hug her new brother on the spot, so great was her sudden elation, but she very discreetly contented herself by fervently embracing Estella only, *pro tem.*

"We're evidently in for an afternoon-palaver, instead of the usual games," St. Helier said, smiling deprecatingly, as he beheld Mrs. Vivian and Mary Norman issuing from the gate of No. 20, and making their way directly towards the group of ladies, of which he, the only man present, quite unconsciously formed the centre.

"What can have brought such a busy crowd of you out here, scandalising? I'm sure I won't undertake to guess," said the Shoddy-Princess, in a hard dry tone, which startled most of her hearers. "As there's only one man among ye, and he a lawyer, we'll take for granted it isn't much good you're after."

She looked sallow, wrinkled, careworn; her large dark eyes, which were usually bright and attractive, were sunken now, and their rims seemed reddened as though by tears.

"I'm sure you will pardon poor Mrs. Vivian, Mr. St. Helier," said Mary, in her usual calm soothing tone; "she is in much distress at this moment, and I had just per-

suaded her to come and ask you for your advice in a matter of which I feel myself incompetent to judge.

"My father went to the City this morning, and I ventured to suggest that we should call upon you, as immediate action of some kind must certainly be taken."

"Yes, that is sure," said Hilda, stepping up to Mary's side, but addressing herself to St. Helier. "I know—unfortunately I very well know—the trouble that was bringing these ladies to you; and their errand is the same as ours."

"If that is so," said St. Helier, considerably more perplexed than pleased, by the embarrassing fact that so many ladies suddenly required particular advice or assistance from him.

He was not a solicitor, and by no means a ladies' man. Women who wanted advice, legal or other, should go to the proper offices where that article was dealt out in professional doses, and at professional charges. He did not want to be talked at, or to, just now; he wanted peace, and he wanted to talk himself, and to have only Estella to listen to all he might choose to say to her.

But Mary—gentle dignified Mary—*her* sister, his sister that was to be, had asked for his help in her friend's name. He could not refuse Mary—and Hilda?

Ah! Hilda had no doubt got herself into some trouble already, thanks to that unbusiness-like arrangement of hers, in which that great cad Latimer had a hand. Poor Hilda, how exquisitely she sang last night! how pale and grave

she looked this morning! Well, if she had got into a scrape, he must help her, of course; nothing could be a trouble to him now, since his mind was quite made up, and his happiness perfectly assured.

"Shall we adjourn for consultation, ladies?" he asked, with a comprehensive bow.

Hilda took Mrs. Ashe's arm, and Mary that of Mrs. Vivian.

"My house and my services are quite at your disposal, ladies," St. Helier said; and as the four walked towards the gate, he hastily turned to Estella, and whispered in a tone of urgent entreaty: "Wait for me here, my darling. I shall begin to lose faith in my too great happiness while you are out of my sight; and—and we must go and talk to father together soon, must we not?"

She answered him with a smile, but she thought it was very hard that *all* those women should want to talk business to him on the very day on which she felt he ought to be occupied about her and her only.

"And so I'm to congratulate you, to repress my tears of disappointment, and rejoice at the sacrifice of another girl of promise—eh Miss Estella?"

It was Mrs. Toegoode who spoke, and who—the others having really left the Gardens—took Estella's hands and gave her a kiss of warm approbation.

"I hope it wasn't a secret, Stella?" inquired Nettie dubiously.

"No, Miss Baby," said Adela-ida laughing, "or if it was,

Estella's eyes had betrayed it to me long before you divulged it."

"And what will become of our poor 'Gwendolen'?" the authoress continued; "will she be handed to posterity minus an ear or a toe, like other great works of art, which seem to be valued in porportion to their incompleteness?"

"Oh no!" answered Estella, with a happy smile, "I hope my heroine's members will none of them be conspicuous by their absence; and I am quite sure that not a single chapter shall be wanting which is necessary for the completion of the three volumes exacted by the publishers and the libraries."

"Well, child, I wish you joy; joy and all possible success," said Adela-ida cordially; "and if you can persuade that æsthetic friend of yours to stay in his charming house with *you* as the mistress of it, I will promise you both my blessing.

"I should feel it to be dreadfully hard to give up our pleasant confabs, our prosperous friendship," she continued earnestly.

"My lot in life has seemed so much brighter, so much better and happier, since I have known you, child; and in my desire to help you on in your literary career, I have actually revived the flagging interest in my own work."

"I am sure the serial you have just commenced is wonderfully bright and entertaining," cried Estella eagerly, "and I take the very greatest interest in it, as you know."

"There are some splendid love scenes in it; Stella told me so," affirmed Nettie.

"And Stella must be a most experienced judge, no doubt," said the authoress laughing.

Estella said nothing; but she laughed too, and she thought that very likely she had a good deal more experience already than even Mrs. Toegoode gave her credit for.

What a wonderful plot she might suggest to Adela-ida now, if she were to tell her that awful story about that pretty woman who had told one man to marry her, while she had a husband living all the time!

Ah! Adela-ida would laugh at that, and say it was too absurd.

Yes, truth *is* stranger than fiction, concluded Estella, and wondered how much longer her hero would be detained listening to such truth or fiction as his self-constituted clients might choose to confide in him.

"Have you no idea what all this mystery with *him* is about, Stella?" queried Nettie impatiently.

"Not the very remotest, my Baby."

"Well, then, I think you were very silly, very very silly, not to insist on going with him too; what's to become of one meek polite gentleman like that, if all those domineering women begin to lay down the law at the same time? He'll be utterly anni——no, dumbfounded, I mean."

"As I am already, not by the talk of women, but by sheer physical exhaustion," said Mrs. Toegoode.

"I'm starving, too," cried Nettie, remembering that it was luncheon time, now that the momentary excitement of the unexpected interview in the Gardens was over.

"Come in and have some luncheon at home," she suggested, glancing from her sister to the hungry authoress.

"I promised to stay here," said Estella, blushing delightfully.

"Then at once prove that you don't intend to be any man's slave, by following the first instinct of nature, which bids you eat while you're hungry," said Mrs. Toegoode decidedly.

"If you would please eat, and let me stand at the window and look out for—for them," suggested Estella, ingeniously changing the tell-tale pronoun from singular to plural.

"You shall do whatever you please, my child, so long as you don't insist upon our starving too."

With this the three quickly made their way to No. 40, where Chapman ministered to their wants with her usual zeal and discretion.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"THERE IS A TIDE IN THE AFFAIRS OF MEN."

MUCH startling news awaited Mr. Norman when he returned from the City that evening, and found Curtis awaiting him among the girls, each one of whom had her particular instalment of gossip to add to the general and very comprehensive account which Jonathan commenced for his chief's edification.

"Father, what do you think?" cried Nettie, scarcely allowing herself time to receive the usual paternal salute on her pouting lips, so eager was she to impart her "tid-bit of news," as she described it; "the Countess Dowager of Dewminster called here to-day with her prodigal son, the Honourable Mr. Raynewater. Isn't that an unexpected honour?"

"Did her ladyship come to see you, Miss Baby?" asked Mr. Norman smiling.

"Oh dear, no!" said Nettie with an injured air, "no one comes for me, or cares about me when they do come."

"I beg your pardon, Nettie," commenced Jonathan, getting uncomfortably red at once. "I always——"

"Oh yes, *you*," answered Nettie crossly, "but then you don't count, don't you see?"

"I often count on you, and never in vain," remarked

Mary in her reassuring way, and poor Johnny thanked her with a surreptitious pressure of her hand.

They, at least, understood one another.

"It was 'Miss Estella,' both her ladyship and Master Ben were delighted to honour," Nettie resumed, glancing mischievously at her sister, who was sitting by the open window, apparently engrossed by a volume of poems which rested upon her knees.

"Mr. Raynewater is in love with our Stella," Nettie continued impressively. "He did not say so, you know, because his ma and our Polly and I were all in the room; but he showed it in his eyes, and in his over-anxious ways, and he has made his ma promise to invite our Stella to come and spend a week or two with her, at her little place on the river."

Nice little place it must be to hold her dainty little self!

"Nettie, you are not sufficiently respectful, my child. When you allude to a countess, you should speak of 'her ladyship'; it is her due," Mr. Norman remonstrated gently.

"I will," said Nettie, "and it sounds so much bigger too than just 'she' and 'her.' 'Her ladyship on the river' suggests a boat as big as a barge, to begin with——"

"You had better go, Baby, and see her ladyship in it," said Estella, looking up from her book.

"That plan would hardly meet Mr. Raynewater's views," said Mary; "it is an undeniable fact, father, that the young

man is head over ears in love with our Stella, and her ladyship, who evidently adores the feckless youth, confessed the state of his heart to me in a whisper."

"Miss Theodosia Braun is going to commence an action for breach of promise against Mr. Peregrine Latimer," said Estella, anxious to divert her father's attention from the idea of the countess's son's aspirations.

"And there are other and far worse charges against Mr. Latimer already," said Jonathan.

"Oh! yes; he has robbed Mrs. Vivian," cried Nettie. "Ronald was here an hour ago and told us all about it, and he told *me*, not as a secret, you know, or else I should not repeat it of course; but he just whispered to me that Hilda had refused him, and told him that she loved her profession a thousand times better than all the men in the world.

"Ronald said that as he was sure she meant that, it would be very foolish of him to make himself unhappy about her any longer; and I told him it would be wicked of him to trouble about a girl who did not care a *sou* for him, when there were——Oh! never mind what I said to him," Nettie suddenly exclaimed, checking herself as she found all the others eagerly watching her tell-tale face. "I managed to comfort him with my nonsensical chatter, and that was the most important thing; for he went away smiling after all."

"Mr. Latimer has robbed Mrs. Vivian!" exclaimed Mr. Norman, whose mind was not adapted to rapid

reception. "You be quiet for a minute, Baby dear, and just let Jonathan tell me what all this means."

Then Jonathan most circumstantially delivered himself of all the charges brought against Mr. Latimer by Mrs. Vivian, Hilda, and last, but by no means least, by Theodosia.

"*She* does not care about the money, however," said Johnny, by way of peroration, "but she is fully determined to wed the man; and if he makes any difficulties, now that she has told him he may keep the money and welcome, she will bring an action against him for breach of promise."

"Then may she win the day, and so promising a husband!" said Mr. Norman laughing; "no jury could possibly award those two a fitter punishment than to compel them to matrimony."

"He could not obey the jury in that case though, father," said Mary, "for he has a wife living here in London at this moment, to whom he was married just five-and-twenty years ago."

Mary now proceeded to recapitulate the startling facts which Mrs. Ashe had told Mrs. Vivian and Hilda, at Mr. St. Helier's that morning. For Mrs. Ashe had been married to Latimer, then John Bell, just twenty-five years ago.

He was then in a responsible position, as sub-manager in a provincial bank. He had forged a signature, robbed his employers, been tried, convicted, and sent out to Western Australia for fourteen years; "that was before '64,

of course," explained Jonathan, who had already heard this account of Mary's, and who now continued it in his own fashion.

"John Bell left his wife in the old country, of course, while he went to seek fresh fortunes in the new.

"He escaped three years after his arrival, made his way to the sheep-farming districts, prospered, and turned up in London again, a wiser and a white-haired, though perhaps not a better, man."

"And his wife?" asked Mr. Norman, who felt as if the Gardens had suddenly been turned into a recreation-ground for lunatics, escaped forgers, frantic spinsters, deserted wives, widows with husbands, etc. He was literally afraid to think any further on so painful a subject.

"His wife ran away with another man," said Mary very quietly, "but she repents her follies and her faults now——"

"Good Lord! you don't mean to say that *she* is in the Gardens too!" exclaimed Mr. Norman uneasily; "really, girls, if this sort of thing is going on I must insist upon your not going into the Gardens at all in future."

"You will trust Mary and me to look after them, Mr. Norman—*father*, won't you?" said Jonathan, laying his hand on his revered Mary's, and leading her towards her father.

"I'm only three years older than he is, father dear," pleaded Mary, looking about fifteen in her sudden blushing bashfulness, "and Johnny thinks we shall all be happier if, if——"

"If our Mary can be elevated to the important rank of a *married woman*, by becoming Mrs. Curtis, eh?"

Mr. Norman laughed quite cheerfully as a gleam of something like reliable light flashed upon him through the bewildering clouds of mystification, with which the gossipy news he had listened to for the last half-hour had filled his brain.

Estella, who knew all about Mary and Jonathan's intention, was now occupied in making certain signals from the window to a gentleman who was seated on a campstool in the Gardens, and who now, in answer to her summons, stepped into the drawing-room.

"I think I shall be well taken care of, too, father dear," said Estella, laying her hand upon St. Helier's arm, "and with—with Everard to look after me, you'll trust me in the Gardens too, won't you?"

"We parted in haste and anger once, Mr. Norman," said St. Helier, smiling; "you won't refuse me your hand now, I hope, since your generous daughter has promised me hers—for life."

"Oh, father! could anything be more touching, more charming, more romantic, more like a delicious novel than that?" cried Nettie, rapturously; "now you have only to say 'Bless—bless you, my children,' and pretend to sprinkle some rose-water over their heads."

Mr. Norman took St. Helier's hand into his with a cordial grasp.

"I am very thankful and very happy," he said, and went away to seat himself by the window.

Too much seemed to have happened to him within the last hour. *Two* daughters to be given away out of this happy home of theirs; what would become of him in the solitude of this great London house?

"I'm not going to run away from you just yet though, father," said the Baby, kneeling on the floor by his side.

It seemed as though she had divined his thoughts.

"You must never leave me, my Baby, my own little one," he said, and felt quite injured as he heard the plaintive inflection of his own voice.

"I can't promise that, father darling," said Nettie, quite bravely, "but I will promise to stay with you one whole year for certain—the year of my Ronald's probation," she added solemnly. "You see, I don't think he quite knows his own mind yet, so I have begged him to go away for a year, and by the time he comes back——"

Her father listened to her, quite as much astonished by her extreme solemnity as by the news she was imparting to him about the arrangements she, his Baby, his little giddy chatterbox, had made for herself and her future husband.

"Mrs. Vivian is in dreadful trouble about this horrid Latimer man, and about the money he has stolen," Nettie continued, still whispering, "and I want to persuade him, my Ronald, you know, to take his mother over to the States and let them put all her money matters straight again there.

"He and I talked over the preliminaries in the Gardens this afternoon, before he called here that was, and to-morrow

I know I can quite convince him, if I tell him that *you* approve of my plan."

"I shall certainly approve of any plan, Nettie, which leaves you at home with your poor lonely old father, and lets me find *you* unchanged at least, and as bright and cheerful, and as much my Baby as ever."

"But you are not going to be left poor and lonely at all, father dear, dear father," said Estella, who had caught sight of his dejected face.

"The only change will be for your aggrandisement, for you will have good sons as well as naughty daughters now, and two houses instead of one.

"The grand one in the Gardens, of which Mrs. Curtis will do the honours for you; and the little one in the Grove, to which you will come for rest and æsthetic relaxation, when the matter-of-fact tyrants here bully you beyond even your powers of patient endurance."

"And in the Grove, Mrs. St. Helier intends to put me through a course of training in the Fine Arts?" said Mr. Norman, smiling. "Ah! my poor Stella, you will find your aged pupil but a very sorry subject for the experiments necessary to the new-fangled notions of culture."

"I am not going to turn schoolmistress, father," laughed Estella, looking brighter and happier than her father ever remembered to have seen her. "I am going to be a very diligent pupil, and to finish my novel straight away now, for I have found a plot in real life for it, a master-mind to guide me."

"And a real hero for the plot and yourself, my Stella?" asked he who had so long been her secret hero already.

She laid her hands in his as he spoke, and lifted her sweet lips to his for the kiss which, given and accepted there, in her father's presence, seemed to sanctify the clandestine betrothal to which she had consented under the old oak in the Gardens that morning.

And he, her hero?

Even as he kissed her with that kiss of betrothal, he felt in his heart what a sorry hero he had in truth been, while her admiring love had so exalted him——

But his was a noble and generous nature, and he resolved that, in future at least, he should prove himself thoroughly worthy of that high place in his sweet love's regard, of which she had from the first deemed him completely deserving.

Is there more to be said?

Perhaps a few explanatory words to such readers as utterly disdain to read aught between the lines.

Mrs. Toegoode's pretty sister Ada, whom we have only seen much veiled as Mrs. Ashe, had married John Bell before he became a forger and convict.

During her lord's temporary absence, she had tempted young Everard St. Helier to run away from his home and his duties with her.

When St. Helier had discovered the disgraceful facts connected with the woman whom he had thought to make his wife, he left her in Rome, where they had been living,

and where she fell a victim to the virulent small-pox, which under ignorant and careless treatment had robbed her of her only treasure—her beauty.

Her sister Adela-ida, who was in Rome at the time heard of the unfortunate creature's destitute and abandoned condition, but utterly refused to go near the infected house.

She, however, communicated with the kind, sad maiden lady, her aunt, Miss Trevor, who, like a true Samaritan, went over to the City on the Hills, tended and watched over her unhappy niece, and brought her back into the ways, if not of pleasantness, at least—of peace.

It was but on the day after Hilda's *début*, just as Ronald and Jonathan had left Grenfell Street, that Ada Bell, being alone in the house with the signorina, was compelled to answer an imperious rat-tat at the door, which she opened to—her husband.

She recognised him more by his voice than by his appearance, for the years which had blanched his raven locks had made other considerable changes too, though naught could detract from the man's imposing proportions.

He looked at her, suppressed a shudder, and recognised her?—not at all.

Was he bent on robbing or doing any sort of harm to Hilda, her gracious, generous, kind and gentle friend? That was Mrs. Ada Bell's instant and terrifying thought, and it led her to tell Hilda the truth as soon as her unsuspecting, but much suspected, visitor had departed.

The results that followed this information, and the consequent visit to Mr. St. Helier, have been written of upon the lines, and need no further explanation.

There is but another paragraph due to our good-hearted unfortunate friend the Hausfrau Braun, who spent a very sad evening in her lonely great house in the Gardens, while her neighbours at No. 40 were all rejoicing.

For Mrs. Braun felt herself deserted and broken-hearted.

Her daughter, her darling Dosie had abandoned her, and fled from London and from England—with her lover, Peregrine Latimer——

Last Christmas, 1878, Mrs. Braun received a long letter from Canada, in answer to which she sent away a Bank of England note for £50, enclosed in a sheet of paper on which she had written these lines:

"MEIN DOSIE,

"De money wat I send to-day is mein for you. Wat remane of yours shall not be touch until you come for it your one self. So it will gro, and so it may gro till the grass is grün on my grave; vile I have one penny, de half of him is always your one, mein poor darling, and vile I live, de half mein home and all mein love is your one too, my beloved and much onhappy child. Belief in the onchangin' love of your mother."

When Hilda wrote to Ronald, "*Ars longa vita brevis*

est," she had fully resolved to devote her life, however short it might be, to the steady pursuit of that art to which she now felt herself irrevocably wedded.

Nor could even Lord Goselyngge's repeated and earnest entreaties alter her resolution.

The only man who could have hoped to vie with Art for the possession of the singer's devoted allegiance, had promised his name, his faith, and his love to another, and so the lyric stage has not been robbed as yet of this queen of song, who is always the most welcome guest, as she has proved herself the most faithful friend, of that happy æsthetic couple now living in the *multum in parvo* of Little Grenfell Grove.

THE END.

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